nowhere to ascend but down

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by YourMinecraftBoyfriend

Summary

Will Graham is a lonely anxious man who'd resigned himself to never finding his soulmate. He convinced himself he never wanted one, but in his private delicate moments, he couldn't help but crave that connection.

He finds it after a few weeks doing active-duty consult work, but what's he supposed to do when he believes his 'other half' is a killer?

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a bruise on Will’s chest. It was strange, placed directly in the center of his sternum.

Even having an eidetic memory couldn’t save him from the occasional missed bruise it seemed. He didn't give it much thought though, his brain was currently flooded with the smiling faces of seven, now eight, to-be-declared deceased brunettes.

There was something he was missing, something that he wasn't reading correctly. It had been quite a few years since he’d been active duty and he’d never consulted on a case this closely since then.

Maybe he was just rusty? Or overwhelmed. Jack cornering him in the men's restroom had thrown his brain in disarray.

His emotions had been so obvious, his mindset practically shot into Will’s head. You didn't have to have his ‘empathy disorder’ to see Jack’s frustration rolling off him in waves. He was a man not easily ignored and Will’s own annoyance at his incomplete picture was expounded by the director still residing in his skull.

Didn't help that he brought in the psychiatrist either.

He bent down to splash some water on his face. It never really helped him clear his mind like it seemed to with characters in movies, but at least he felt marginally cleaner.

As he brushed his teeth he idly scratched at the bruise, he noticed it didn't hurt. A furry head chose that moment to softly collide with the back of his knee and all considerations for the quarter-sized blemish were forgotten.

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He barged into his motel room just as frustrated as he was when he left the crime scene. Three people were tugging him in different directions, all very forceful personalities.

Jack was both the easiest and hardest to turn off. His booming voice demanded attention but he was simple to understand if nothing else. Will knew clearly where he ended and Jack’s strict sense of justice began. His emotions tended to be overpowering, but not in the twisted way the shrike’s were.

The shrike had Will in his hooked claws, intent on not letting go even now. Everything about the scene had the bird in his head screeching ‘not me!’ ‘my poor girl!’ ‘this is murder!’ The shrike flew from his mouth and with it came a picture clear as day. He didn't want to hurt his precious daughter- what he’s doing isn't murder, it couldn't be. They were honored so it

wasn't murder, but what they saw in the field? That was murder. No wonder the shrike practically screamed his confession using Will's tongue, he couldn't stand to have them think he didn't love his precious girl. He would never dishonor her that way, it was repulsive.

He did his best to shake the shrike off, but he was a fluttering mess flitting about his cage. All Will wanted in that moment was to be back in his own head. The dogs usually helped, their desires were so easy to understand. When Will laid down on a blanket in front of the fireplace surrounded by his pack, he could almost forget he wasn't one of them. Just a simple creature with simple urges who wasn't burdened by expectations and the loud thoughts of every person he met.

He sat down on the stiff motel mattress, closed his eyes, and waded into the stream; the shrike calmed down and Jack would not venture out here.

There, against a young tree, fresh with scratches from a shedding buck, was a pair of antlers.

Will knew what this was. His imagination was fraught with illusions and metaphors and he unfortunately wasn't daft enough to miss a sign so obvious.

There was one resident in his mind that hadn't gotten his due diligence.

He was so strangely quiet though, Will didn't think he'd ever encountered a killer this quiet. Every observation he made was surface level. It was so clear cut, there were no threads to unravel, no leads to follow. What they saw in the field was the entire, horrible, beautiful picture. Anyone could see he was a sadist, the girl was alive when her lungs were removed. He was obviously taunting the FBI, telling them everything they needed to know about the shrike because they couldn't figure him out themselves.

That's all it was though, a piece of art. It told as much about the copycat as a painting without a plaque.

Will stepped into the shower. He hadn't actually touched Cassie Boyle's corpse, but he still felt he stunk of death.

The scalding spray did little to shake off the copycat. He was quiet, but only in the way that whispered words were just as loud as shouts in your head. It was as if the copycat knew Will was trying to read him and decided to dangle himself just out of reach, it was frustrating. Brain Jack agreed.

There was no bar soap here, so Will made do with the neutral-smelling body wash in a tiny container that would only cover half of him. He used the same motions he did every time he showered, no one really thinks they have a routine when lathering their body but they do. Start with soap in his left hand, lather the right arm and the part of his back the right couldn't reach but don't strain the bad shoulder. Switch soap to the right hand, lather his left arm then start from the feet and work up. It was easy to fall into.

By the time he reached his torso, the copycat's cheshire grin had faded to the back of his mind. He touched the center of his chest and remembered the bruise yesterday that didn't

hurt. He pressed again. Still nothing. Maybe it had faded already. He looked down and, nope, still there. Though maybe it looked a bit darker?

Suddenly exhausted from the day's events, he barely rinsed himself before he shut off the shower without washing his hair. He brushed his teeth quickly in front of the mirror, holding a towel to his hips as he finished. His eyes drew lower once again- the bruise seemed even darker than when he was in the shower now that it contrasted with the harsh bathroom lights. He let the toothbrush dangle limply in his mouth as he touched it again. Still no sensation, the skin felt unblemished and unmarred.

As he said before, he wasn't daft enough to miss an obvious sign. On anyone else he would've thought them an idiot for dismissing the early stage of a soulmark on such an obvious spot.

He froze, finally registering the information he just laid out for himself. Will Graham was developing a soulmark, he had a soulmate.

He tried briefly to feel any bit of excitement but the only emotions that gripped him were dread and nausea. Within the next few weeks, a new person would slot into his life perfectly. That’s how everyone described it. The mark would fade in and form when their presence in your life became routine and solid. The marks were typically small and unobtrusive, as reassuring in their presence as a partner should be. Jack had a tiny locket on the inside of his ring finger. Beverly, a brightly colored songbird behind her ear. Price told him his mark was on his lower back and proudly showed a tramp stamp he got done in the 90s, but it was actually behind his knee- which Will only knew because of how often he’d seen Zeller kick him there.

The center of his chest seemed a bit more….obvious than his colleagues’, but it wasn't large. Soulmarks were typically no bigger than a quarter, so at least that was normal.

He tried to make out what it might be, but other than a vaguely Y-shaped blob he was utterly clueless. There were a slew of new people he’d encountered over the last few days, his head hurt just trying to think of them all. The Quantico FBI headquarters had dozens of employees, the shrike case had him interviewing and collecting evidence from tons of people, it could even have been one of the cleaners or local cops at the scene.

Will wanted to run to his little house in Wolf Trap and sequester himself for the next few months. His head was already so full, he wasn't ready for another person to be there permanently.

He’d honestly thought he was one of those people lucky enough (in his eyes) to remain unblemished. As he was well into his thirties, he felt the odds were in his favor.

Obsessing over it wouldn't help anything though. He’d just have to look for anyone touching their chest or looking at his for the next few days. And avoid them as much as possible. For now, all he could do was attempt to sleep, no doubt Jack would drag him to more interviews tomorrow.

He dug out his last clean t-shirt from his suitcase and did his best to relax his mind. The panic from earlier had drowned out the other people in his head for a moment, but of course they

decided to return the second his anxieties started to abate. There wasn't even the steady breathing of his dogs for him to concentrate on. He was dead tired but he knew sleep wouldn't come easy and wouldn't stay long, his brain wasn't kind enough for that.

He couldn't have been unconscious for more than two hours when a knock stirred him from his shallow sleep.

He scrambled for the door, realizing just before he opened it how thin the shirt he was wearing was. With a quick ‘shit!’ he threw on yesterday’s flannel, laying crumpled at the foot of the bed before answering.

“Good morning, Will. May I come in?” Dr. Lecter greeted him before Will’s eyes had time to adjust to the harsh morning light.

“Where’s Crawford?” He was reluctant to let the psychiatrist into his temporary sleeping quarters. Will hadn't had a good experience with a shrink yet and if their previous conversation was anything to go by, that wouldn't change.

“Deposed in court, the adventure will be yours and mine today. May I come in?”

Will almost laughed to himself at the repetition, it was like Lecter was a vampire needing to be invited over a threshold. The name certainly fit.

He said something about the admittedly delicious meal he brought. It raised his opinion of the doctor slightly, he’d been anticipating skipping breakfast.

Will’s responses were short and clipped, he thought Lecter would give up after his dismissal of the olive branch he’d tried to extend, but his answer to Will’s ‘I don't find you that interesting’ made him pause. ‘You will,’ said like it was a little joke to himself. Weird, but maybe the guy was just vain or something. Will was having a hard time reading him, which probably set him off more than what he was actually saying.

By the time they’d finished, Will was feeling slightly less tense about spending the day with the man. He’d listened to Will’s theory about a second killer and hadn't tried to pry into his head again. The mongoose comment was a bit weird, but maybe it was a saying from… wherever he was from, though Will got the feeling that the doctor just had an emphatic love for strange metaphors.

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Surprisingly, Dr. Lecter was wholly pleasant the entirety of their trip to the construction site and then the Hobbs residence. He was quiet for the most part, seemingly content to listen to Will’s hunches and add his own insight occasionally. The silence in-between was refreshingly lacking in awkwardness and the doctor didn’t attempt to fill it, which Will appreciated.

Arriving at the Hobb’s household banished the mildly congenial atmosphere in favor of desperate action. It felt like there was no time in between Will seeing Mrs. Hobbs pushed out

her front door, fatally wounded, and Dr. Lecter firmly moving him aside to properly cover the younger Ms. Hobbs' cut throat.

He killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. The shrike that had been flitting around his head felt like it had flown into his throat and been crushed between his molars. This still did not silence the bird unfortunately, but he had stopped shrieking about his daughter in favor of softly pleading Will to see.

He did see. He had gotten too close and every one of the shrike's actions made complete sense at the moment. Of course he had to kill- no honor- all those girls, anything to protect his daughter.

"Will."

His gaze kept jumping from the bullet holes in Garrett Jacob Hobbs' chest to his daughter's heaving gasps. This wasn't enough, he had to do something for his- oh god, Will didn't even know her name.

"Will."

There was a roaring in his ears, his hands felt empty. He felt like he should be holding the knife clutched in the dead man's hands. There were no other voices in his head, just the shrike's soft pleas, so easily overpowered by his own loud thoughts. There was so much blood, so much on him-

"Will!" Lecter's voice finally cut through. Will wrenched his head to the doctor. His face was all careful neutrality. "I need you to call the paramedics."

He took a beat too long to come back to reality. Lecter was about to say something else when he spurred himself to action. Quickly, he grasped his phone in shaky hands, though his words came out clear and sure.

For some reason, Will thought the time until the EMTs arrived would pass in a blur, but he was startlingly present. He didn't know what to do with himself. Lecter's orders helped- he had Will find and disinfect a cloth to bind the girl's wound and help him support her head. The whole time he spoke calmly throughout, giving careful instructions and explaining what he was doing. With the shrike getting quieter with every minute and still no other presences to take his place, Will felt oddly peaceful. All he had to focus on were Lecter's words.

"-she will need stitches, interior and exterior. I would ideally like to designate her surgeon as I will not be able to perform the procedure myself, though I doubt there will be time once the first responders arrive. If you could tilt her head a little more to the left, Will. Thank you."

The silence of the room would've been oppressive had Lecter's words not filled it. Will hadn't said anything since he finished the call- though he'd barely felt the words when they left his mouth. The doctor didn't seem to mind, or maybe he could sense that Will couldn't stand a silent room right now with only the girl's desperate gasps to fill it.

“I need you to keep her head still and bent slightly forewords, a tad further. Now hold steady while I apply pressure, her airway needs to remain unblocked while I staunch the bleeding.”

He didn’t let his focus drift to anything but Lecter’s orders until the paramedics arrived. It wasn’t until the daughter of the shrike was being wheeled away on a stretcher and Dr. Lecter followed her into the ambulance that Will’s more typical mindset decided to snap back into place.

Suddenly, the bustle of people was deafening inside and outside his head. He desperately craved the simple normalcy of his dogs and lonely little home, but there was still blood on his hands all the way up to his hair. He hadn’t realized until then, but it was on his glasses too.

The forensics team would need to swab him down, Jack would need his statement. He wanted to visit the hospital as well, though he wasn’t sure yet which one they had carted the girl off to.

The first thing he did once his phone was deemed not an essential piece of evidence and returned to him after his bloody fingerprint was cleaned, was call his neighbor in Wolf Trap. He had a feeling he wouldn’t be home for a few more days.

Chapter End Notes

this fic is still in my docs as 'au where hanners doesn't have chest hair' which was the title it got changed to after 'stupid dumbass bullshit dont you ever post this cringelord' oh how the turntables

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They hadn't let him in Abigail's- the girl's name, which he found right after the ambulance left the scene- room that first night. Not surprising as he wasn't family and the nurses said she was currently in a 'delicate state.'

He hadn't even thought about leaving Minnesota until he was expected to teach again. Every night he was allowed, he spent at Abigail's bedside. Dr. Lecter had been there a few nights, though he'd had to return to his practice in Baltimore. Will couldn't blame him, he felt useless here, but there wasn't much he could do.

He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the moment the fact that he killed a man to really hit him, but as the week dragged on, he slowly became aware that it wouldn't. The guilt he was expecting failed to manifest and he was left unsure and vaguely guilty over his lack of guilt.

The time spent at her bedside couldn't last though. Her doctors assured him her coma was temporary, though it would likely be weeks if not months before she awoke again. Until then, the best thing he could do for her was try to keep Jack and his theories at bay.

She hadn't killed those girls, he knew that for sure, but she had helped her father in some way, likely as the bait. That would be enough for Jack to condemn her, so Will kept his theories close to his chest. He was feeling…paternal and wasn't sure if it was from the shrike's lingering influence or his own sense of responsibility. There were only two things he was sure of at the moment, one he had to protect Abigail and two, he did not regret killing her father.

He'd missed the normalcy of his classroom right up until his students clapped as he entered. It was inappropriate. All he had done was let a woman die, orphaned a girl, and failed to do anything useful to stop her from bleeding out. And apparently he was up for accommodation. It felt like a bad joke. He hadn't even needed that much convincing to go see Dr. Lecter.

Maybe Alana was right, the doctor had been there, maybe it would help. She was so convincing when she wanted to be.

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"...did you just rubber stamp me?" It felt a little wrong to have Lecter looking up at him. That was the exact reason Will was still on the second floor of his office.

"Yes. Jack may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you, and our conversation may proceed uninterrupted by paperwork." 'Conversation,' as if they didn't both know the

reason Will was here.

“Jack thinks I need therapy.” He did, he definitely did, and he wouldn’t even be opposed if it ever actually worked.

“What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there.”

“Last time he sent me into a dark place, I brought something back.” There were a few things he brought back- a couple new residents in his mind, more fuel for his nightmares, a murder he was applauded for.

“A surrogate daughter?” That halted Will’s racing thoughts. That wasn't true, was it? He was only feeling appropriately protective. But wouldn't the appropriate amount of protective be none at all? She wasn't really his responsibility. That felt wrong just to think, he had to take care of her, there was no other option. “You saved Abigail's life, you also orphaned her. That comes with certain emotional obligations, regardless of empathy disorders.”

“You were there. You saved her life too. Do you feel obligated?” He couldn’t help the bitter defensiveness that leaked out of his tone.

“Yes, I feel a staggering amount of obligation.” Will was surprised that Lecter would admit it so plainly. It was…comforting in a way that he wasn’t comfortable with at all. “I feel responsibility. I’ve fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs.” It was too much- far too similar to Will’s own feelings.

“Jack thinks Abigail Hobbs helped her dad kill those girls.”

“How does that make you feel?” Wow, asked like a real therapist.

“How does that make *you* feel?” Will responded just to be an ass. He wasn’t sure why he was being so prickly, but it felt like his natural response at this point. It was better to keep people at an arm’s length- they were less likely to take root in his head that way.

“I find it vulgar.”

“Me too.”

“And entirely possible.” He noticed Lecter trying to catch his eye, he resolutely ignored it.

“It’s not what happened.” That was a lie, or at least partially. He didn’t know how Lecter knew, but Abigail was definitely involved somehow. Hopefully, it wasn’t as obvious to Jack.

“Jack will ask her when she wakes up, or he’ll have one of us ask her.”

“Is this therapy or a support group?” It certainly hadn’t felt like therapy so far. Or at least not like any therapy that had been attempted on him in the past. He didn’t feel relaxed, he rarely did if he wasn’t in his little house in Wolf Trap, but he felt understood, or at least accepted in a way he hadn’t by most other people. Lecter could keep up with his random jumps in the conversation and wasn’t bristled by Will’s standoffishness, which he appreciated.

“It’s whatever you need it to be. And Will,” Lecter’s tone finally drew his eyes directly. “The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best in yourself, not the worst of someone else.”

Will’s mind was buzzing as he drove home. He hadn’t pursued therapy in years, but up until Lecter’s they had all been the same. Every therapist, psychiatrist, and shrink attempted to clumsily enter his head in ways Will saw coming a mile off, it was easy enough to manufacture the response they clearly wanted to see. It was no different than how Will operated in every interaction- his empathy would read his target and he would attempt to make himself palatable to the individual and the situation. As tiresome as it was, it wasn’t something he could turn off, which is why it surprised him so much that his ‘conversation’ with Lecter went so differently.

He didn’t know why he hadn’t realized it sooner, maybe he’d been distracted by the shrike, but he couldn’t read the doctor. Well, he could to a degree, he saw surface level disinterest with the woman at the construction site. He saw faint traces of amusement at Will prowling along his upper level, pencils in perfectly straight lines that suggested a grasp at control, and practiced professionalism when he was holding Abigail’s throat together. He couldn’t see much more than that however, Will wasn’t seeing out of his eyes and knowing his inner motivations. Worst of all, he couldn’t see what the doctor expected of him. It was disconcerting and slightly relieving at the same time. He could convince himself that the doctor didn’t have any expectations for him, so he didn’t have to focus on meeting them or feel guilty that he failed to.

Maybe he would actually see Lecter again, after all it wasn’t real therapy, they were just conversations.

He felt bad about how little he’d been home this last week, ever since he returned from Minnesota he’d had lectures and debriefings and early mornings at the firing range. His dogs were quick to forgive him though, they mobbed the front door as usual as soon as they heard his car on the gravel driveway.

He didn’t even bother to remove his shoes before he sank to his knees, allowing the wriggling mass of fur to overtake him with wet tongues on his cheeks and snouts under his arms. Each got a handful of scritches as he let their simple desires drown out the complicated masses of people. Millie laid down first, her hips weren’t what they used to be, she’d need her pills with dinner tonight. Buster and Russel wanted outside, Russel would wait by the door but Buster would start nipping if he waited too long. Stella made that overly loud sound when she sniffed, almost like the thumping noise of an overhead helicopter. She was excited that she could smell someone new on him. Porter and Maya had quickly distracted themselves by playfully nipping at each other. With how big they were, it looked more dangerous than it actually was- Maya should probably know better by now but she was getting a bit more defensive now that Porter, barely a year and a half old, was bigger than her. Winston hadn’t left his side, he headbutted Will softly when he gave attention to the others. He seemed to be getting along with the pack well enough, but he obviously had some separation issues, they’d have to work on that.

He propped open the front door to let his pack out as he prepared their dinner, not his own- he'd had a couple gas station sandwiches on his way home. Millie and Winston plopped themselves at his feet rather than venture outside, he took a minute to rub both mutts' ears.

It was an easy rhythm to fall into. He threw the chicken and beef in a pan to brown, and the sliced sweet potatoes into a pot to boil with chicken broth and rice. He'd done it a million times, he didn't rush, the simple pace of his actions were balms to his always sprinting brain. It allowed him to digest his thoughts without spiraling. If anything drew him inside too far, he would be drawn quickly back to the surface by a wet nose or the smell of burning beef. He turned both burners down to a simmer and left to get Millie's hip medicine, he'd have to find something other than peanut butter this time, she'd taken to licking it until the treat was gone and just the pill remained.

His mind wandered as he grabbed a couple pieces of lunch meat- Winston would want something too if he saw Millie get one, and watching him wharf it down would help convince her there were no bitter tasting pills. With all the commotion around the shrike and the copycat, Will felt almost guilty worrying about his…other problem. But there wasn't any more he could do about at-large serial killers for the night, so he allowed himself to really give it some thought now.

He'd checked his soulmark every time he got dressed, like a person with a family history of skin cancer would check a particularly large freckle, and like the aforementioned simile predicted, it had spread. His mark was about the size of a silver dollar now, a bit larger than the typical quarter-size. What was more worrying was that it showed no sign of sharpening into some specific design yet, which meant that it likely wasn't done growing. It had been a week since it had first appeared, most people's would have started to focus by this point, or at least filled in with a bit of color. His was still that stark black, vaguely Y-shaped blob. Of course it wasn't bad enough that he was actually getting a mark after all this time, it just had to be a uniquely strange one.

Millie and Winston ate eagerly from his hand, she swallowed the pill without much fuss.

"Good girl, see that wasn't too bad?"

He didn't know if he preferred the weirdness of the mark to be attributed to himself or whatever partner fate decided would 'complete' him. Will still didn't want to meet them, the comfort of his isolation couldn't be shaken by a simple blemish on his skin, but he was getting slightly frustrated. He didn't have a single lead. Not a single person had given any indication one way or another that would clue him in that they contained a matching mark. No flickers of gazes to chests that would indicate a matching mark of their own rather than perverse interest in female co-workers. There was no new presence that had easily slotted into his life. All of his worries before about there being too many people had been replaced by the opposite- no one fit the admittedly flimsy profile he'd drawn. While this might have been comforting from a base standpoint, Will would rather know and be actively avoidant than be surprised.

The beef had fully browned and when he cut into the chicken there was no pink. The dogs had wandered back inside by that point- lured in by the smell. Stella was drooling.

He divided the kibble into bowls on the countertop and scooped in the rice and potatoes, dividing the excess broth between the seven portions. Finally he added the beef and chicken, stirring the mixture for an even spread of the ingredients. The dogs were stilled with a ‘stay!’ and the motion of his hand- it was important that he included the visual commands too, Millie was starting to lose her hearing.

He laid down when his tasks for the night were complete: the dogs were fed, let out another time, the counter was clean, and his sink was empty. It was only then, in the darkness of his little house, made smaller as he didn’t use the second floor for anything other than storage, that he allowed himself to feel disappointment. He didn’t want to admit that there had been a tiny flicker of hope that had manifested along with his dread- he craved simple devotion as much as anyone else, no matter how much he was used to isolation.

Humans were inherently social creatures, it was normal to want connection, he reasoned.

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Will threw the signed evaluation down on Dr. Lecter’s desk. He wasn’t even sure what he wanted to accomplish by doing it, Jack still wanted him on active duty.

“This may have been premature.”

‘’What did you see? Out in the field.”

“Hobbs.” The memory was sharp though he knew it was an illusion. Hobbs’ corpse was free of mushrooms and his vacant eyes stared through him to the empty sky above. He’d always had an active imagination, but reality had never warped like that when he was fully present.

“An association?”

“A hallucination. I saw him lying there in someone else’s grave.” He couldn’t emphasize how real it looked. Just as real as when he was slumped next to his daughter, bleeding out.

“Did you tell Jack what you saw?”

“No,” He scoffed. There was no way he could tell Jack, he wouldn’t understand. He doesn’t even think that Jack actually realized how he reconstructs the crime scenes. What Jack does understand is hard evidence and results. The only thing he would see if Will came to him with hallucinations would be a man more fragile than he previously thought.

“It’s stress. Not worth reporting. You displaced the victim of another killer’s crime with what could arguably be considered your victim.” His *victim*? That felt so utterly wrong when referring to Hobbs. He was justified in killing him, it felt right, but Christ, if he liked killing Hobbs wouldn’t that make him his victim? This gardener didn't feel disdain for his victims or just in their deaths, neither did the shrike.

But, his helpful brain supplied, *the copycat did. You felt the same subtle elation he does.* The comparison made him want to throw up.

“...I don’t consider Hobbs my victim.”

“What do you consider him?”

“Dead.” He couldn’t even begin to articulate anything he was thinking, it was all he could do to keep his response short.

“Is it harder imagining the thrill someone else feels killing now that you’ve done it yourself?” Lecter’s eye contact was weighty and ensnaring. He wanted to dismiss it, look away before the doctor saw that it was the opposite of what he assumed. He still couldn’t read him, where before that had put him at ease, it was terrifying and confusing at the moment. Will tried to give a weak smile as he nodded, though Lecter probably saw it was pained and forced. He almost looked disappointed, which confused Will even more.

After a moment, he relented. Will’s shoulders relaxed immediately without the burden of eye contact.

“Their arms. Why did he leave them exposed? To hold their hands? To feel the life leaving their bodies?” That brought a real smile to his face. The idea that this pragmatic gardener would crave the physical contact of corpses couldn’t be further from the truth. It seemed that was Lecter’s design though, to show him the opposite of the truth in order for Will to strengthen the profile. He took Will’s disregard graciously and without offense, something he wished Zeller would do occasionally.

“No, that’s too esoteric for someone who took the time to bury the bodies in a straight line. He’s more practical.”

“But your farmer let his crops die. Save for the one that didn’t.”

“And the one that didn’t died on the way to the hospital- they weren’t crops, they were fertilizer. The bodies were covered in fungus.” A few different varieties too, though Price was right about the lack of any that were edible.

“The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain, an intricate web of connections.” The structure of the profile started to come together like puzzle pieces.

“Maybe he admires their ability to connect in the way all unpartnered humans can’t.” He’d be an older man, no children, unmarried and never had been, unmarked obviously. He might not look alone to others, but he wouldn’t be close with any coworkers or old schoolmates.

“You can,” Lecter said like it was a little joke between them. Will preferred that to the drastic seriousness that Jack used or Alana’s pity.

“Not physically.” Unwillingly, he felt a smile crawl across his lips. If this was therapy, it was a piss poor excuse of it- Lecter seemed more keen to help Will see the killers than banish his empathy for them. It suited Will just fine, he knew no attempts to herd his thoughts into an ordered flock would work anyways.

“Is that what your farmer is looking for? Some sort of connection?”

“...I have to call Jack.” Will was already drawing his phone out before he realized how rude his actions probably were. The doctor just chuckled and opened the patient exit.

“I presume you know how to make your way out from here?”

“I do, thank you Dr. Lecter.”

“Goodnight, Will.”

“Goodnight.” He’d cut their appointment short by almost forty minutes, but Lecter didn’t seem bothered. If anything, he was amused.

Hopefully Jack was still at Quantico, it was nearing eight but knowing him it could go either way.

“Hello?” He sounded tired but he picked up on the first ring.

“I have an updated profile on your farmer.”

“...Lay it on me.” The exhaustion in Jack’s voice vanished instantly. Will felt the man’s eagerness to catch this killer in his spine.

“He’s alone and the catheters suggest easy access to medical supplies. Look for family doctors, pharmacists, surgeons, nurses, or private practitioners in the area that are unmarried, unmarked, and without children. He wants connection and the only way he thinks he can get it is by planting his victims- he thinks he’s transforming them.”

“Transforming them? He doesn’t believe he’s killing them?” Why did Jack always sound so surprised? He treated every case like it was his first.

“He’s not stupid, Jack. He knows their bodies don’t survive the process, he doesn’t need them to live after the spores take root. That's where he believes their consciousness goes. He’s going to want to plant another growbed soon, after you dug up his last one.”

“Thanks Will, good work today.” With that quick acknowledgement the line went dead. Hopefully Jack wouldn’t call on him until they were ready to move in on a suspect.

Chapter End Notes

hate how different ao3s formatting is to like, word docs

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as he finished with his classes, he made his way back to Johns Hopkins. He'd only slept in his own bed once last week, his dogs were the only reason he hadn't just been living out of his car between visitor hours. Hannibal had been right, Abigail was his daughter in every way except any that counted.

He grabbed one of her attending nurses, Nora- she'd woken him up a few times when he'd slept in Abigail's room until morning- to inquire about any changes in the girl's condition. She gave him a pitying little smile and informed him "same as yesterday dear." Will hated her a little bit for it, but he couldn't really blame her. She was more gracious than he would've been in her shoes.

Carefully opening the door so it wouldn't squeak, he peeked his head into Abigail's room. The nurse was right, everything was exactly the same. No newly added beeping machines, frantically scrambling doctors, or deranged men trying to bury her that Will always expected.

It's like I never left. His lips curled into a pained little smile.

The only real difference was the bouquet of dark blooms sitting in an elegant vase with a little card attached reading 'Abigail.' There was also a small book next to it, though Will couldn't make out the title from his perch at the threshold. Dr. Lecter must've been here, the handwriting was his graceful calligraphy and he was the only one who left books for an unconscious girl.

Will sighed and left the room. He didn't want to mar the quiet afternoon serenity with his presence just yet. The golden glow from the light streaking in gave Abigail's pallid face a faux rosy complexion. He could pretend she was asleep.

After Stammets tried to steal her from her room, Will was more reluctant to leave her alone, but he still had work and his dogs to take care of. A short trip to the bathroom to deal with his neglected hygiene shouldn't have caused him this much anxiety. Maybe it was because Stammets had tried to take her while Will was in the hospital, he should have been in that room before the killer could have even approached her bed.

Maybe it was because Stammets was still alive.

The words he said in his last appointment with Lecter still rang through his head. "I liked killing Hobbs." No metaphor to hide behind, said plainly to another human being. He thought about the bullet he put in Stammets' shoulder and allowed himself a moment to imagine it piercing the man's heart. Would that feeling of a clear reality return to him? Would he once again be awash with a tranquil sense of power, *righteousness?*

Lecter hadn't turned from him. Will knew he wouldn't, he wasn't sure why he knew, but his empathy implored him to confess. He made Will's feelings seem so…reasonable. "Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good." It was said so simply, like he was teaching emotions to a toddler. How could Will possibly disagree?

He slung his pack from his shoulders and locked the single occupancy bathroom in one clunky motion. He knew he looked tired, to put it mildly. His hair was unwashed, he could feel the buildup of daily grime and sweat from too many days neglecting a proper shower. He had the foresight this time to bring a clean change of clothes along with his deodorant and toothbrush.

He stripped down to his underwear and checked the lock on the door one more time. Still locked, he rubbed the depressed latch once to remind himself that it was secure. He'd probably feel the need to check in a couple minutes again anyways.

The sink water was cold and seemed in no hurry to warm, Will still did his best to wipe down his body in place of a shower with the dish towel he brought from home. He did his best to wet his hair in the sink, careful to not hit his head on the faucet. Dripping, he caught his reflection in the mirror. The bags under his eyes were more pronounced than usual, he was shaking slightly from the cold water evaporating from his body, his eyebrows were pinched together in worry. He used his thumb and forefinger to manually relax his brow and unclench his jaw. It helped his headache slightly.

He pulled back and his eyes fell to his chest.

His breath caught in his throat. He'd been thoroughly distracted by his comatose 'daughter' and Stammets this week, the mark on his chest the least of his worries. The few times he decided to change his shirt, he never spared more than a passing glance- yes it was still there, yes it was slightly larger than last he checked. It was vaguely alarming, but he felt guilty for spending time thinking about it, it felt so trivial compared to his 'real' worries.

He probably should have let himself worry.

It was the size of a fist now and the first details were starting to come through, Will could recognise the shape immediately. A very blurry and incomplete stag skull stood proudly in the center of his chest, devoid of any color- the black lines hard and startling.

His first thought should have jumped to someone involved in the shrike case. It didn't, or at least not in the way it was supposed to. The copycat had mostly let him be after the Hobbs case had started to settle. He hadn't left him, Will knew that for certain, but he prowled below the other, louder personalities that floated into Will's psyche. Right now though, he could see that cheshire grin superimposed on top of his own.

He blindly dunked the cloth into the water and swiped at his face, scrubbing hard at his cheeks. He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes until he saw little silent fireworks.

Stress was getting to him if he just thought the copycat could be his… he didn't let himself complete the thought.

He finished wiping down the rest of himself quickly, throwing his deodorant and clothes on with little care. His boxers were on backwards at first, he debated just leaving them. The sun had fully set when he settled back in Abigail's room and her face was once again that sallow white. Will sighed and realized he'd left his book in his car.

His eyes fell on her form once again, he desperately wished he felt some sort of consciousness pressing into him, but no micro expressions could be gleaned from a face totally slack.

He reached for the little book of Milton's poetry Hannibal left.

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The first thing Will did after waking- in his own home this time- was let the dogs out. If he waited too long, Buster would jump up on the furniture, though it was Porter's small bladder that was the real motivator to swing his legs off the bed. They barreled outside one after another, Winston brought up the rear after nudging Millie from her spot by the heater.

Stella darted off across the yard to the person making her way up Will's drive. He hadn't heard Alana pull up. His hand flew to his chest before he could think better of it. Quickly, he crossed his arms to disguise the motion, from Alana's expression he clearly didn't pull it off. She didn't press the issue, likely used to his behavior by now, she just gave him a sheepish smile and patted Stella's head.

If it was her mark adorning his skin, it wouldn't be the currently hand-sized monstrosity he bore. Or maybe she would be the one cursed with the stag skull. He hadn't ruled out that it was his unique blend of neuroses that caused the mark, his thoughts were certainly dark enough.

"Morning."

"I didn't hear you drive up." He knew he wasn't for Alana. Even if his chest was bare, even if he ignored the months he'd known her before it appeared, he would never be for her. She saw him as this breakable little thing, it was obvious from her gentle voice and clearly projected movements. Any attraction she had for him was dwarfed by her desire to 'fix' him.

He would let her try. He wondered if she knew that.

Will's attention was less on her words and more concealing himself, but he froze as soon as she mentioned Abigail was awake. His arms fell limply at his sides. In his peripheral, he noticed Alana's eyes drop to his thin t-shirt. It didn't matter, he needed to see his daughter *now.*

She led him back inside with her signature gentle insistence. He understood her reasoning, but it didn't reach his hindbrain. Will had been so isolated these last few weeks, his own fault for only seeking the company of a comatose girl, and Hannibal's non-judgemental words had given him a false sense of normalcy. He wasn't Abigail's father, no matter how…paternal he was feeling.

“I’m not collecting another stray.” Will didn’t know if he should be mad at Alana for insinuating he thought of Abigail as another one of his dogs, or himself for his erratic behavior that led her to believe that he did.

“The first person Abigail talks to about what happened can’t be anyone who was there when it happened. So that means no Dr. Lecter either.” That seemed a tad cruel even if Will could understand the thought behind it. Hannibal hadn’t killed her father, he was in her hospital room too, he should be allowed to see her. He knew he felt responsible, just like Will did, he wondered if he was feeling that paternal instinct as well. For some reason, Will hoped so.

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“There was a ninth victim who also fit Abigail Hobbs’ profile, but Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn’t murder her. The killer who did wanted us to know he wasn’t the Minnesota Shrike, he was better than that.” The copycat preened. Will knew it was just his empathy giving the copycat form, but he felt his gaze on Will just as clearly as his students’. “He is an intelligent psychopath. He is a sadist. He will never kill like this again. So how do we catch him?” There were some at the bureau that wanted a neat conclusion for the Hobbs case, not everyone believed that there was a second killer still at large, or at least they didn’t want there to be. Jack’s influence carried weight though and this lecture was even more tightly packed than his usual ones.

“He had intimate knowledge of Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ murders, motives, and patterns. Enough to recreate them and arguably elevate them to art.” The mental copycat his empathy created never spoke, he wasn’t kind enough to give Will answers the way other killers happily did. He would never do something so blasé as explain himself, that would be too easy. Will felt the rumble of a satisfied purr in his chest at his analysis though. “Before Garrett Jacob Hobbs murdered his wife and attempted to do the same to his daughter, he received an untraceable call. I believe the as-yet unidentified caller was our copycat killer.”

It was as if he was in the room, watching Will sing his praises. The copycat had detached himself so he could more clearly watch the lecture; his shadowy form took the spot in front of the exit where the pair of men stood. Will’s footsteps sounded like the clops of cloven hooves as he marched forward to greet them- the copycat was forced to dissipate back into Will’s head.

The leaving students created a wave around the three of them, the presence of both Crawford and Lecter afforded them a wide berth. Each man individually cut imposing figures, so both had students filing out neatly, like minnows clinging to the safety of the mangroves to avoid the open water predators.

“Any new insights?” Jack said instead of a proper greeting.

“No, but give them a few days and they might have something, though I wouldn’t count on it.” Jack wasn’t asking about the students’ insights, but Will chose to ignore that. He gave Lecter a brief nod of acknowledgement before returning to Jack. “Is there a reason you’re here or-?”

“Yes, actually. I want you and Dr. Lecter to visit Abigail Hobbs.” Will fully straightened his back, his attention now on Jack entirely. “You know my theories about her involvement-”

“I told you before Jack, Hobbs worked alone.”

“Regardless, I want you there. You can go over now?” It was phrased like a question but there was no room for argument. Will didn’t want to argue anyways, he wanted to see Abigail and if he got annoyed every time Jack steamrolled him he’d have popped a blood vessel a long time ago.

Jack split off as soon as he confirmed Will’s compliance, once again leaving the day’s mission to him and Lecter. Instead of the cheap rental car though, this time the pair took the doctor’s polished, jet black Bentley. *Of course he drove a Bentley.*

Will’s anxiety started to mount as they drew closer and closer to Port Haven. For all his eagerness to see Abigail awake, she’d never actually spoken a word to him. She might not even know who he was depending on how the event affected her mental state. He knew he shouldn’t be this nervous that a girl who, really he shouldn’t even be having this much contact with, would dislike him, but he was.

Hannibal reached for the dial on the radio, turning the classical station down to barely a whisper.

“Tell me Will, what has you so troubled? You have barely spoken since we left your classroom.” Had Lecter been trying to speak to him the whole time? He hadn’t noticed, too busy rolling in his anxieties.

“Sorry, I’m nervous. I guess.” He swiped a hand down his face and dislodged his glasses. A headache from a combination of his pinched facial muscles and the brightness of the highway at midday was starting to form.

“You have seen her in her hospital room almost every night since she was admitted, are you intimidated that now she will be able to see you as well?”

“I’m worried what she might think of me. I killed her father.”

“Who was trying to kill her.”

“Point taken. Every night at her bedside I imagined what I’d say to her, but I couldn’t imagine what she’d say back.”

“That surprises me, surely your gift gave you some insight?”

“I can’t read the microexpressions of a person who’s in a coma. She was only conscious for a brief moment when we met and there was so much panic that it drowned out any other feelings. All I have of the facets of her personality are what Garrett Jacob Hobbs showed me.”

“So you are anxious that you are unable to predict her responses, something that you are unused to. This is compounded by the fact that she is someone you care deeply for, but does

not necessarily feel the same for you." As usual, he cut to the core of Will's problems without reservation. It would irk him if it was coming from anyone else, but Hannibal had proved he would listen without judgment if Will was honest with him.

"Yes. I don't know which…version of myself will be palatable to her, if she can even stand to be in the same room as me."

"You were your authentic self when you were at her hospital bed, is that not something you can replicate now that Abigail has returned to consciousness?"

"I can't be my 'authentic' self with anyone. I'm worried that I've made an attachment that is entirely unwelcome. Alana said she thought I was collecting another stray."

"Dr. Bloom only knows the facet of you that you show her, she does not see the attachments you make outside your pack."

"And you do?" He spat defensively. Will didn't know why he reacted like that, Hannibal *did* know a more intimate aspect of him than Alana. For some reason, Will still couldn't read the man, and it allowed him to convey the thoughts he actually had rather than ones that would be palatable.

"I believe so. You have allowed me to see the depths of your care for Abigail and your paternal responsibility for her. I do not see any similarities between the care you have given her and that of your animals besides perhaps, your loyalty. You cannot predict how Abigail will respond, but you can give her your protection, just as you have every day since she was hospitalized."

Will sighed heavily and let himself fall into the headrest. Hannibal was right of course, there was no way he could predict anything Abigail would say or do. It was useless to allow his mind to run in desperate circles.

"...thank you, you're right." His nerves hadn't abated entirely, but he did feel marginally better. He wondered what was different about Lecter's not-therapy that worked so much better than any other psychiatrist he'd seen. Maybe that was the whole point, that Lecter was his 'friend' not his therapist. He didn't have many to compare it to though.

Hannibal just hummed in agreement and pulled into Port Haven. He gave Will a quick reassuring squeeze on his shoulder before exiting the car and leading the way into the building. It was nice to just follow Hannibal's confident stride, his sureness was something Will could leech off of as his anxieties mounted the closer they came to Abigail's room. His back was broad, reassuring. Will had the oddest urge to lay his head between his shoulder blades.

Hannibal stopped abruptly a few feet from their destination. Will saw the slightest downturn of his lips as his nostrils flared. The reason became apparent as a grating voice hit him just a moment later. Rage washed over his anxieties in a second, leaving them drowned and buried.

"He catches insane men because he can think like them. Because he is insane." Will didn't want to kill Freddie Lounds like he wanted to kill Hobbs and Stammets, but it was a close

thing. Briefly, he let himself imagine slamming her head into the wall and kicking her teeth in so she couldn't spout any more bullshit.

"Would you excuse us please?" Who knows what else Lounds said about him before they arrived. He turned to Abigail and let the anger drain out of him. That was the last thing the girl needed. "I'm special agent Will Graham."

"By special agent he means not real agent, he didn't make it past the screening process. Too unstable." He read a ripper case a while back where a man's tongue was removed and placed in a bible he held. From the confines of his mind, Will didn't have to use his empathy as an excuse to understand the motivations of that particular murder. Though Lounds didn't deserve the holy sanctity of a church for her display, maybe a seedy motel would be more appropriate. Or an outhouse.

"I really must insist you leave the room-"

"If you want to talk-" Will snatched her business card before she had fully drawn it from her purse. He was grateful that Hannibal swiftly dismissed her, Will would not have been so tactful.

"Abigail, this is Dr. Lecter. Do you remember us?"

"I remember you. You killed my dad." All of the anxieties that had vanished in Lounds' presence returned with a vengeance. Abigail looked at him with a mix of disdain, confusion, and a careful blankness. She wasn't as practiced as Lecter in controlling her expressions though, so Will could glean the depths behind her mask. She was smart and pragmatic- Alana was right about her there- but she was also adept at hiding herself. In distress, she turned to apathy rather than letting others prey on her more delicate emotions.

"You've been in bed for days Abigail, why don't we have a walk?" She seemed reluctant and gave Will a nervous glance though she was clearly eager to leave the beige room.

"What type of doctor are you anyway? Another psychiatrist?"

"Yes. You have met Dr. Bloom, we are colleagues of hers."

"You mean she's a college of yours." She nodded to Will. "He just asked if I remembered both of you, which means you were there when Mom and Dad died too."

"I was."

"Did you even try to save Mom? Or were you both too focused on killing Dad." She looked like she was about to say something else when Will gently interrupted.

"Dr. Lecter saved your life Abigail. He held your throat together until the paramedics arrived, your mother was dead before we reached your front door. I know this has been… challenging," She scoffed at that but the disdain had left her expression. "But we're here because we want to help you."

"That's what everyone says, that they're here to help. Why are you any different?"

“Perhaps we're not,” Hannibal gently helped her from the bed as he spoke. “Still, we are here for you in whatever way you require.” Even though Hannibal led the conversation away from Will, he was careful to use ‘we’ and ‘us’. Will wasn't really sure how he felt about it other than vaguely comforted. It was nice to rely on Hannibal to not fumble his words like Will was sure to, but still be included in the offer of support.

“You won't try to send me to group? Tell me I need to 'cooperate with my recovery’?” Will couldn't help a surge of protectiveness rise in him. He understood her resistance to therapy, it was always clinical, impersonal, and the ‘help’ always had their own agenda. They would label her with PTSD and likely a personality disorder and skirt around what she wanted as if it didn't matter. It was familiar to him in a way it really shouldn't be.

Hannibal steadied her on her feet and offered the closest thing the man had to a comforting smile. It didn't reach his eyes, but was charming nonetheless.

“Not unless you would like us to. I am a psychiatrist but I am not yours, we are merely here to help enable your wishes.” She looped her hand through Hannibal’s preoffered arm.

“Even if it means I want to go home? Would you do that for me?”

“Yes,” Will replied before Hannibal could. He didn't mind, if the doctor’s small upturn of his lip was any indication. “To the best of our ability.”

Alana wouldn't be happy about letting her leave Port Haven, but Abigail wasn't a child. She had agency in her own decisions, Will didn't want to take that from her. She was grateful, Will felt satisfaction bloom alongside the grief and knew it belonged to her.

Will was planning on trailing behind the pair- Hannibal was a perfect pillar of support without Will’s meager assistance- but Hannibal gently grasped his forearm before he could fall behind. With an uncharacteristically soft look, he nodded Will forward to fall along Abigail's other side. He felt himself heat from embarrassment and gratitude, shameful at being caught and corrected for his lack of social graces, but pleased that Hannibal wanted him at their side rather than falling behind. It made him feel less like a screw up, like his presence was actually wanted there.

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The visit felt far too long and far too short at the same time. He half-expected to leave his ‘emotional obligations’ behind once he saw her return to consciousness, but if anything, talking to her strengthened his resolve. It was only their first meeting, if you didn’t count the circumstances of her falling into a coma, but his attachment to her was frightening. He’d hoped his projections of fatherhood would abate, however seeing her personality and wit only made the delusion worse.

He couldn’t help but see himself in her; Abigail was sharp, withdrawn, frightened in a way that made a person keen. Though, unlike himself she held her head high, maintained eye contact, and disguised her derision for others behind a careful mask, reminiscent of Dr. Lecter, though it was clear he had decades more practice.

Will didn't fail to see the little family triad of her, Hannibal, and himself that his mind was attempting to create. He felt ridiculous that he allowed the image to still sit heavy in his psyche.

Hannibal hadn't bothered to turn the radio back on as the pair returned to Quantico, though he hadn't tried to engage Will either. With his traitorous thoughts shoved into a locked safe and drowned in the stream where they couldn't distract him further, he took in the minute details of the doctor's expression. It was difficult as his typical manor was one of neutral apathy and any emotion he let through was only conveyed in miniscule twitches of his facial muscles. Will had cataloged his expressions over their last few encounters, so his lexicon was slightly more thorough than his previous attempts at reading the man, though he was still not easy to decipher.

His lip was slightly downturned and his lower eyelids were just a hair higher than where they normally sat. Those were the only indicators that he wasn't entirely apathetic towards the last few hours.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Will? You have been staring quite intently." He flushed slightly at being caught and readjusted his glasses to once again serve as his barrier.

"Just trying to get your thoughts on…all that. You seem agitated- no, affronted, in a way."

"You could have simply asked, though I suppose that would have been too straightforward." The miniscule pinch of his eyes vanished in a subtle spark of teasing. Will had never *had* to ask what someone was feeling before, he honestly forgot he could. "But yes, I was feeling rather affronted. Ms. Lound's actions should not be left undisciplined."

Oh, Will could *definitely* appreciate that sentiment. Maybe it wasn't his smartest move to threaten a journalist, especially one as vulgar and bottom-feeding as Lounds, but she had also threatened him. Not something as overt as his physical well-being, that would've rolled off Will like water off a duck's back. No, she came for his relationship with Abigail, fresh as it was.

"I can't say I blame you, though she seemed to back down once you got involved." Will didn't have the physical stature nor the imposing air Hannibal did, he felt his little intimidation play might have worked better if he did.

"She was boorish to me, yes, but the offense lies in her treatment of Abigail and moreso, you. Her rudeness is not something I take lightly."

Will chuckled. It was likely she'd have another inflammatory article posted by the end of the day, though hopefully it would keep the focus from Abigail for the time being. This wouldn't help Abigail's opinion of him though; he still wanted to kick Lounds' teeth in for trying to build a wall when Will was desperately trying to build a bridge.

"I appreciate you not stopping me from talking to her, though I fear it did more harm than good."

“Should she retaliate, it will only serve to damage her character further, and I feel no desire to censor you, Will.”

He hummed in acknowledgement. No matter when he saw the woman next, it would be far too soon.

Chapter End Notes

i know this starts a lil slow but i prommy it picks up from here :]

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will violently burst awake in another motel bedroom, as usual awash in sweat. He'd hoped with his mental shrike crushed by his teeth, he'd stop inhabiting Will's subconscious, but apparently he wasn't so lucky. Garrett Jacob Hobbs was making a valiant effort to revive himself in Will's dreams, especially as he and his daughter returned to Minnesota once more. This time, instead of Hobbs himself haunting Will's nights, he took the shrike's place. He shushed Abigail soothingly while he slashed her throat. Waking did not help clear the image.

Nightmares were not new to him, in fact they were one of the only consistent phenomena in his life, it didn't make them any easier to deal with upon waking though. The worst part of it all was the loneliness, he only had his own judgment to tell when he was finally conscious, and his mind was prone to falsities. Even when he was a child there'd been no one to wake him with gentle hands and soft words, he didn't know why he still craved that now.

He'd been too complacent over the last few weeks, he'd neglected the toll his empathy took in favor of indulging his fatherhood fantasy. It was such a nice escape to let himself wade into though, far nicer than his reality.

His shirt was soaked through, he ripped it off in the black of the room. He changed in the dark, not having the energy to scramble for the light switch and not wanting to think about the skull on his chest.

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Whatever platitude Alana was trying to give Abigail was cut off by a drop of dark blood dripping onto the girl's forehead. Will looked up and saw a great maroon gash staining the wood slats seeping down from the second floor of the cabin. He spared one more glance at Abigail's horrified face before he sprinted upstairs.

As he took in the scene before him, his brain moved in two separate directions simultaneously. He calmly dialed an emergency response team and did his best to take in the scene with a detached focus. This was made by the same artist who painted the picture in the field, of that he had no doubt. The copycat had struck again in exactly the same way Will said he wouldn't, like he was mocking him. Abigail interrupted the second, more anxious thought of his with a startled, sad noise that came out of her throat at the sight of her friend- hung and humiliated.

Alana was quick to escort her downstairs and outside the cabin, Hannibal joined him on the second floor after a few minutes.

He still had a hard time reading the copycat's design, all his conjecture was still frustratingly surface-level. The sadism was obvious, so was the presentation and mutilation. Whoever the copycat was, he felt no connection to the girls other than a brief encounter where he deemed

them worthy of murder. There would be no evidence left either, he didn't need the forensics team to scrub the place to see that. All it meant was that this kill would lead them no closer to catching him.

Hannibal stayed at the top of the stairs, seemingly to allow him time to see the scene through the pendulum's swings. There was no need, Will already knew how the killer felt, how he saw his victims, nothing new would be gained from imagining himself performing the execution.

He waved Hannibal over before the second anxious thought could take hold. He knew he was just delaying it at this point, but he had to put it off as long as possible. Maybe if he kept distracting himself it wouldn't become real.

Hannibal laid a hand on Will's shoulder, a simple request to allow him to see the body as well. He took in her graying skin and bone-dry lips with that signature air of apathy. His time as a surgeon no doubt desensitized him to the sight of dead bodies, though he was probably used to ones that held life more recently than Marissa Schuur. She'd been dead twelve hours at least.

He sighed and turned his attention to Will.

"She was hung and partially bled. A start to the act of preservation, as with the rest of the trophies here?"

"No, this wasn't about her. He didn't care about preserving her, he wanted to create an image." Antlers infested every free inch of the room, all sharp and multi-pronged. The windowless room was the ideal staging area for something so macabre. "He saw the attic from Lounds' article and couldn't resist painting another picture here. The canvas was perfect, especially with Abigail returning to Minnesota."

"Then he knew about her release. Can we expect the killer to be someone with knowledge of her condition?"

"Lounds knew, so that information could be anywhere, either spread by her or her source. There's not going to be any ties to this girl either, just like there weren't with Cassie Boyle."

"Hmm." Hannibal took a moment to examine the body. He lifted up her forehead after he donned his blue surgical gloves. Once her hair was neatly brushed back, he checked the entrance and exit points of the antlers piercing her body and holding her aloft. "You described this attic as a canvas, does our copycat figure himself an artist?"

"In every move he makes. He's sadistic, their screams are poetry to him, he's creative, he takes inspiration from what other 'artists' are doing, he's intelligent and self-amusing, he sees the FBI running around without a clue like a Shakespearean comedy. He doesn't care if he's trampling all over Hobbs' design as long as it amuses him and he can make it beautiful."

Hannibal didn't try to argue his points nor did he berate Will for the semi-complimentary language. He took it all in stride and once again surprised him by allowing Will's dark musings without a hint of scrutiny towards his character. Though he'd proven that he would

not judge the abnormal aspects of Will's mind thus far, he was still pleasantly stupefied. Jack would have given him a pained grimace and a lecture about 'not letting the darkness in' if Will got too gruesome.

He would have smiled if they weren't standing in an active crime scene. He felt the corner of his lip twitch anyway.

Hannibal loosened her jaw so Will could see inside her mouth. There was no visible evidence of anything forced inside, no interior damage, but his eyes caught on the dried brown patch in between her upper incisor and canine. There was no damage on the inside of her lip nor anywhere else in her mouth. The punctures in her body were made postmortem so the blood wouldn't have been able to make it up her throat, but even if they had been done while she was still alive, none of the antlers pierced her lungs, stomach, or throat passage, meaning that the foreign tissue on her teeth might not be hers.

"Did you find something?"

"Maybe, we'll have to wait for forensics though."

Jack arrived shortly and dismissed Lecter to escort Abigail from Minnesota. Will felt the loss of his solid presence immediately, Jack's accusations now had no barrier before they struck Will. He demanded answers that Will didn't have.

The tissue sample they found matched Nicolas Boyle, it went against everything he just surmised about the copycat. Boyle was everything the profile said he wouldn't be, he wasn't the impersonal, artistic killer who left no evidence, he was a desperate young man outraged at his sister's murder. Jack acted as if it was Will who hung Marissa Schuur and left her to bleed out when he tried to point Jack away from Boyle.

It wasn't possible that he could read a profile so wrong, was it? If this was the work of Nicolas Boyle surely he would've felt something more *personal* at Cassie's display, not solely the quiet pride of an artist. Jack didn't want to hear it though, he hadn't liked Will pointing away from Abigail either.

Despite Jack's frustration, it was much worse as soon as the man left him alone. There was nothing Will could focus on besides the insidious thought lurking just below the surface. He didn't want it to breach, but there were no more distractions for it to hide under.

The copycat was Will's soulmate.

He didn't know for sure, if he went to anyone with his theory they would call him crazy, but his gut was confident and his gut was rarely wrong. He still didn't have a clear picture of the killer, but he knew he wasn't Nicolas Boyle. It felt just like when Lecter would give him false theories to help Will find the true ones.

The presence of the copycat's first displayed kill (not his first overall, no one was *that good* right off the bat) coincided with the first blotch of black on his skin. With Marissa Schuur's

body, he was now an established presence in Will's life, which coincided with the mark developing a visible shape. If the copycat really was his soulmate, it would explain the size of it too. Marks were *supposed* to be small, unintrusive, easily hidden and kept private, non interfering like a relationship should be. Of course Will's would be huge and disruptive if his soulmate was a fucking *serial killer.* And what did that say about him that fate decided this would be his other half? He desperately hoped he was wrong for once.

He didn't have any real evidence anyway, his conclusion wouldn't help him point out the copycat either. All he had was this *feeling* that he couldn't shake, not the facts and logic his job depended on.

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The ambulance left without taking Alana. She was still a little dizzy, but the EMTs determined she didn't have a concussion. Hannibal was apparently well enough to leave on his own with Abigail in tow.

Will wished he was there when the attack happened, he would've been if Jack hadn't wanted to keep his misbehaving dog on a short leash. He wanted to talk to Abigail, but he knew he probably would only make the situation worse. He didn't even get to talk to her after she saw Marissa. Christ, where did he get off thinking he could be a good father to her when he couldn't even be there when she needed him? Hannibal and Alana weren't law enforcement, Will should have been there to protect *all* of them.

As much as he was convinced Nicolas Boyle wasn't the copycat killer, he still felt that same confusing rage he did with Hobbs and Stammets. He might not have killed his sister and Schuur, but he hurt Abigail. She was already so shaken from earlier, he wanted reparations, justice. But he was stuck here, going through more pointless statements until Jack released him. His head throbbed.

"Will?" Alana smiled kindly. "You know this wasn't your fault right? There's nothing you could have done."

It felt like shit that he was the one being comforted while Alana was still putting pressure on her head injury. He could have fought Jack harder, he could have *been* there. Will didn't say that though, he just gave Alana a pained smile and didn't meet her eyes. She tried to reach out and put a comforting hand on his upper arm, but he flinched back before she could make contact. Great, now he was reacting like a beat dog.

He left her to the care of the EMTs with a quick excuse that he didn't really hear. Jack would want more interviews and evidence tomorrow, but Will was anxious, exhausted, and his head felt like it was splitting open. He pulled out his phone and booked a flight back to Virginia before Jack could convince him to stay longer, the man wouldn't be satisfied unless they got Boyle in custody and he was long gone.

Chapter End Notes

im not normalpilled about this show at all btw

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This was becoming…problematic to say the least. Will was an observant man, professionally so, but that wasn't his main concern. He'd dealt with observant men before. No, Hannibal's concern was with his own unexpected hesitation. His victim criteria was never very strict and Will was certainly a rude man, but it felt wrong somehow to elevate him with his typical method. It would be a shame to give him only one design when the man's mind could conjure so many, he hadn't been bored since Jack Crawford introduced him to the nervous creature.

Will's little home, miles from any civilization, obviously belonged to him. His buried fears and anxieties hid in every corner if one knew where to look. It had two stories but the door to the second floor was shut tight with a large plastic storage tub blocking it, as if Will was attempting to forget the house was larger than it was.

His pack was well-behaved, which Hannibal appreciated. Live animals weren't something he ever considered allowing into his home, but he could appreciate the subtle savagery that even thousands of years of domestication couldn't breed out. Their jaws snapped with satisfying thuds around the sausages he brought.

The beasts were loyal too, they all readily consumed his offerings, but they were still hesitant to allow him the affection they give their absent master. Some more so than others, the small excitable one put his front paws on Hannibal's knee almost immediately, while the quiet dog with reddish-brown fur retreated to stand at the front of Will's bed, tucked in the corner of the living room. He looked like a little canine statue as he eyed Hannibal suspiciously.

Will's instructions were clear, precise, and the premade chow was easy to find. Hannibal added a few of his own cuts to the mixture which the little beasts were more than happy to scarf down. He smiled, genuinely for once, they could smell the difference in the meat, same as him, yet they had no moral misgivings. Meat was meat. He was starting to see the appeal Will's little family had.

If only the man himself could be so flexible. Will had a penchant for violence that Hannibal could smell on him. It would be exquisite if his guilt and damning morals quit interfering, though, Hannibal guessed, they were part of his allure. He found endless entertainment watching the agent attempt to fight his true nature with such fervent desperation. He'd hoped he could take the time to convince him of a better, more freeing path, but it seemed fate had different plans for the special agent.

The stag skull's meaning had been obvious since Hannibal saw the first prong. He made the display in the field for Will after all, he was almost insulted at the marks simplicity.

Hannibal was unused to being this indecisive with his actions, finding a soulmate had not been something he'd considered in many years. On the one hand, the feeling of dull stagnation that haunted him had alleviated completely. This was a new challenge, it was

stimulating in a way his displays hadn't been in the last few years and he was excited to try to navigate this new game. On the other, he had to acknowledge the very real possibility that he may lose, that was what made the game so interesting. His careful instincts that he cultivated over three decades living outside the typical realm of morality screamed at him to end this early while he still had the chance. He ignored them for once, it'd been so long since he let himself be a little reckless.

He wouldn't kill Will just yet, if only for the novelty of the man and the experience. Plenty of killers had soulmarks, but none that had a track record comparable to his did. He couldn't help the small surge of pride that physically signified that he was more than those the world would try to loop him with, he was an entirely new creation. Besides, the mark was still growing, about the size of his open hand now, and he'd like to see it in its entirety before it started to fade with the loss of its other half.

Despite his own curiosity, Will Graham was still a problem that needed to be dealt with. Hannibal was a resourceful man though, murder wasn't the only tool in his wheelhouse, far from it.

Will had told him about his fishing briefly, a far cry from Hannibal's hunting, though he could appreciate the skill it required. Luring his prey wasn't something he'd considered, he preferred to take a more direct approach, but there was a certain artistry in crafting appealing bait. Will's lures were quite beautiful, they were mostly composed of bits of bone, feathers, and fur, gorgeous little things free of plastic. Hannibal pulled out the vial he was keeping in the pocket of his overcoat, Cassie Boyle's hair was still perfectly preserved. It required precise, minute movements to attach the hair in a way that was cohesive with the rest of the lure, Will must have very fine motor controls if the amount and complexity of the various lures was to be trusted. He would have made a fine surgeon.

At the moment, Hannibal wasn't planning anything directly, but he wanted as many pieces on the table in his favor as possible when the time came. And it will come, he could only play house with the agent and the girl they orphaned for so long before the man's gift cured his blindness. Though he may have longer than he originally factored, Will seemed keen to blind *himself* for as long as he could in order to maintain the little family he was trying to create.

He was painfully lonely in a way he would never admit to others or even himself. It was obvious, the man had seven dogs. No one understood the heavy toll his empathy took, nor did they understand his inability to turn it off. Most people saw an introverted, nervous man with a morbid party trick, not the personality desperately trying to stay afloat in the onslaught of other minds who would overtake him. His job was only worsening his condition, killers more often than not had forceful mindsets that linger in his psyche. It was an utterly unique suffering that had Hannibal captivated. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't fault fate for conjoining them, he'd never been so taken with another's mind.

There was one more factor that concerned him that he found far less amusement in. The tiny, delicate, *lonely* part of himself that he thought was long dead started to surface. That small part of him craved acknowledgement, he wanted Will to *know* him. He wanted that little family just like Will did, that ridiculous desire to father Abigail in the way that was taken from him with his dear Mischa.

Abigail reminded him so much of her, she would make such a perfect daughter too. She was intelligent, inscrutable, malleable, and already socialized to Hannibal's design. As much as Alana and the social workers wanted her to 'forget and recover from what happened to her,' she could never truly be free of her father's influence. After all, the blood and organs of his victims were still fueling her cells.

Her loyalty was a concern, her tendency for manipulation was entirely self-serving. She would change from a frightened little girl to an unfeeling predator depending on what would serve her best in the moment, with some refining it could be a very useful tool for her. Hannibal was confident he could earn her loyalty with time, he was already covering her murder after all.

Unlike Will, her morals were flexible and prone to drastic shifts, she had killed without his interference, she could easily be influenced to do so again. Should she come to accept her becoming, and all its beautiful freedom, then Will would be the outsider in their little family. He was still convinced of her innocence, and likely would remain so should the truth of Nicolas Boyle's disappearance be revealed to him. That would go far towards fostering Will's own becoming.

A giddy excitement swirled thick in his veins. There were so many options laid out in front of him, all with their own exquisite complexities. Hannibal's involvement would have to be both subtle and overpowering, and any missteps could be costly, but he was an experienced player.

He shook his head in a rare moment of potential energy. It wouldn't do to anticipate the ending when the game had barely started.

He pressed the tip of the lure into his thumb until it drew blood. They were wickedly sharp little creations, so easy to pierce skin with. He brought the drop to his lips and imagined it was Will's.

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For all the difficulty Will had reading his not-psychiatrist, he could at least tell the man had a complicated family situation. There were no pictures on his desk, no pinned drawings from small children, no tan line from a previously worn ring. No one with a family to go home to would have the time to pursue and master his renaissance-man lifestyle. It did surprise him to learn Hannibal was an orphan, but it made sense when he gave it due consideration. He couldn't imagine Hannibal writing letters to his aging parents or frequenting their grave sites. Every aspect of the doctor emphasized his solitary lifestyle, though it was a very different sort than Will's own.

Hannibal's solitude was like that of a god's. Something holy and unattainable, an example to be emulated but never successfully followed. So entirely different to Will's, which was more comparable to a starved mutt's, deemed beyond help. He would remain caged long after his master's home was emptied. He was flea-ridden and quick to bite, even if he was released no family would welcome him with open arms. Not when there were so many better options.

Hannibal said Will created a family for himself. He thought he was talking about his dogs. “I was referring to Abigail,” he responded. Will clutched the armrest of the seat to keep his hands from shaking.

He explained the newest case in a haze. Family everywhere he looked, it followed him. Like a child thinks the moon does on particularly long car rides. Abigail wasn’t family, no matter how much he wanted her to be, and Hannibal… he didn’t want to touch that thought with a ten foot pole. Will feared that if he allowed the fantasy, the serene stability of Hannibal’s presence, he’d lose himself in it. He’d find himself lost fully in a beautiful make-believe world where he was never unbearably *alone.* His imagination was terrifyingly realistic, if he allowed himself to fall, he may never surface again.

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A week passed, the mark was larger still, his headaches were getting more frequent, and another family had dropped dead. In the past, a therapist’s waiting room would cause his anxieties to spike, the issues of its occupants slipped into him without hesitation.

Hannibal’s was different. Maybe it was because he never saw any other patients when he arrived- the good doctor was the only therapist in his practice after all- or perhaps he had simply gotten used to the space. Despite his comfort with the room, he still paced restlessly. He had an excess of agitated energy that he couldn’t shake.

“Good evening Will, please come in.” He didn’t even meet Hannibal’s eyes as he stormed into the office, casting his bag aside in the process. Of course the doctor was perceptive enough to see the carefully wrapped present tucked in the front pocket.

The case was getting to him. He finally put together the full picture and it was horrifying.

Family, that intangible thing that had been haunting him all week with its sweet promises, that was what these children were unknowingly throwing away. More so than the murders was the… *dismissal* of this precious gift they were given, something Will might never have. He had no personal stake in any of the boys or their dead families but he couldn’t help feeling slighted. Unlike Hannibal, he couldn’t just reign in his emotions, they leaked out of his pores and disrupted the detached professionalism of the room.

“Tell me, why are you so angry?”

“I’m angry about those boys. I’m *angry* because I know that when I find them, I can’t help them!” They were dooming themselves to a lonely childhood, just like Will’s, just like Hannibal’s. “I can’t give them back what they just gave away.”

“Family.” Not a question. Spoken from a sense of understanding. Will knew he did understand in a way, he was one of the few people that could. Hannibal had found peace in a singular existence but he knew what it was like to lose.

“...yeah. We call them ‘the lost boys.’” It wasn’t a moniker Will came up with, too fanciful, too romantic. The name conjured images of a promised Neverland, of fairies and pirates and mermaids that buried the reality of the corpse of a child in the fireplace, who had just been

forced to bear witness to murder of the people that raised him, including a little sister with his same chocolate brown eyes.

Will felt sick, his head throbbed. This case pulled him in opposite directions. As it dragged on, the haunting concept of family kept returning him to the fantasy he couldn't let himself consider, while at the same time he remained grateful he had nothing yet to lose.

"Abigail's lost too." He thought of teaching her to fish, would she lose herself more to the memories of her father, the man who almost killed her? Or would she find it grounding, an anchor in reality the way Will did. "And perhaps it's our responsibility, yours and mine, to help her find her way."

Will *ached* . Did Hannibal know what he was proposing? What it meant to him? An image of the three of them flashed unbidden behind his eyelids. Will and Abigail, waist deep in the stream behind his little house. They aren't catching much because his dogs keep disturbing the water, but she's smiling. His waders are a little too big on her. Hannibal's accented voice calls the two of them as he sets out containers of tupperware with a soft expression on his face.

"And how would we do that?" He forced the scene away. It was ridiculous that he allowed that much indulgence, he was a grown man. These delusions of his were reminiscent of a prepubescent girl, dreaming of the day a shining knight on a white horse would whisk her off her feet.

"I have consulted with her physicians and caregivers. Currently, I am in the process of being granted legal guardianship over her. It is slow going and will likely take months to finalize, but I wanted to offer you the same status."

Will froze. The scene came back brighter, he could almost hear Abigail's laughter.

"I…I would never be approved. Too unstable." He tried to keep his voice from shaking and he couldn't help the open vulnerability from leaking into his tone.

"You have a stable, full-time job, own a home, have no outstanding debts, and have shown a remarkable amount of care and dedication for a girl that you have protected from those who sought to hurt her. On multiple occasions. Those who would approve your guardianship will not overlook these factors. You are voluntarily seeking help for your mental health issues, showing that you care enough to solve the problems you see in yourself. If this is something you wish to pursue, it is indeed very possible. I could help you, if you asked me to." He wanted it. He wanted it so desperately it *hurt.* It was as if Hannibal peered into his head and saw his ridiculous little fantasy, but instead of mocking him, he served it up on a silver platter and said 'are you sure you want this?'

Will tried to keep his voice even, but despite his best efforts it was barely above a whisper. "I would like that."

Hannibal smiled, not one of those barely-there twitches of muscle, but one that reached his eyes, crinkling them slightly, a hint of his crooked teeth showed. Will felt his belly flop at the sight and a faint heat spread up his chest.

Thankfully, Hannibal steered them back to the case. It was easy to fall back into the profile and ignore the hope seeping into him.

Chapter End Notes

ehehe hannibals pov

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He didn’t realize he was outside at first.

When he awoke to the flashing sirens of a local police beat car, his first thought was that they were pulling up outside his home at ass-o-clock in the morning. Then the pain set in, his bare feet were bleeding sluggishly, the wind whipped his arms red. He didn't know how he didn’t wake up, there was a rock embedded in his heel.

The cops’ questions passed through him without registering. He hadn’t even realized Winston was at his heels until the officer pointed him out. His fur was soft and tangible, felt real, though that wasn’t necessarily an indicator he was awake, his dreams were always very tactile.

The officers shuffled Winston and him in the back seat of the cruiser and gave him a shock blanket.

“Do you have a history of sleepwalking?”

“Not even sure I’m awake now.” He hoped he was dreaming, if he was awake now he was far more unstable than he thought.

The ride back to his home was long, enough that he had almost convinced himself that it really was a dream. There was no way he walked multiple miles in the biting chill of a Virginian winter without waking, it just wasn’t possible, right?

The officers left without much hassle, they offered to take him to the hospital, but his feet weren’t that bad all things considered. He knew they meant a different type of hospital, but Will wouldn’t even entertain the thought. He wrapped his feet with the same bandaging he used for the dogs, slipped his thickest pair of socks over the wrappings, and waited.

Then waited some more.

The hours ticked by slowly, Winston stayed dutifully at his feet. Maya stirred and laid her head in his lap for about an hour before she trotted back to her bed in front of the heater. His head fell forward into his hands as he came to terms with the fact that he wasn’t going to wake up, this was reality.

He considered trying to sleep for the remainder of the night, but what if his unconscious mind took him wandering again? What if this time he didn’t stick to the country roads, where someone had the possibility of finding him? His options were slim, his home was an extension of himself, there wasn’t a trap he could set to wake himself that his unconscious mind wouldn’t know to avoid. He thought about digging out his old sleeping bag from his camping gear and zipping himself up tight, enough that he physically couldn’t leave his bed.

The concerned, pitying faces of the officers flashed through his mind, wanting to cart him off to the nearest mental institution. No, he wouldn't bind himself tight in the fabric, it was too much like a straitjacket.

He resigned himself to not sleeping, the hours till sunrise drug on, and eventually even Winston laid himself down to rest. It seemed wrong to turn on the lights now, to interrupt the natural dark with his mounting anxieties so he left them off, and did what little he could to distract his mind without the use of sight. That meant no reading, no fly tying, no going over old case files he brought home. Eventually, he just sat himself in front of his kitchen window and pretended he could see the early drizzle of sleet-snow come down. His head throbbed and every time he closed his eyes, the phosphenes were in the shape of branching antlers.

It was only Tuesday, well Wednesday now, his next appointment wasn't until Friday. The sun had just started to peak over the horizon when he grabbed his keys and left Wolf Trap, barely remembering to fill the dog bowls before he was gone.

He called Hannibal when he was twenty minutes away from the doctor's home. It was still early but he picked up on the second ring.

"Hannibal," Will didn't even let him start his greeting. "Can I come over?" His voice was small, weak and he hated it.

"Good morning, Will. You may. Is there a reason you seek my presence so early?" Will let out a shaky sigh. It was comforting that Hannibal took him in stride, he didn't need someone else's panic compounding his own right now, that's why he went to Hannibal in the first place, nothing seemed to sway his steady composure.

"I went to bed in my home and woke up seven miles down the back roads. I…I don't know how I got there. I think I was sleepwalking, but I've never done that before. When I woke I thought I was still dreaming, hoped I was."

"Why did you hope you were still asleep?"

"I hoped that there wasn't more wrong with me. Occasional hallucinations are already bad enough, I'm afraid I'm slipping." *If I haven't already.*

"Has your family ever had a history of sleepwalking? It's a rare occurrence for someone to develop the habit in their mid-thirties."

"Not that I know of, but I didn't really know anything of my family outside my father. They were people that existed, mentioned briefly in passing, but never visited. I don't know their medical history." Now wasn't that sad? He didn't even have any aunts or uncles he could name, no cousins or grandparents to fill the contacts in his phone. Poor lonely Will Graham, clinging desperately to his few friends to save him from the horrors of the job he chose.

He wanted to hang up, turn back around, and tell Jack he was sick and couldn't come in today. There was nothing waiting for him in his isolated home in Wolf Trap though, he had

his dogs but not much else. The hallucinations would come closer, the headaches would cease to ebb, and any human contact he had would be reduced to the grunts he gave to the teenage cashier at the gas station.

“I would say stress then, though I’d like to suspend my diagnosis until you arrive.” There was no pity in Hannibal’s voice, which halted the pitying voices in Will’s head. “Did you walk yourself home when you woke?”

“No, a couple local cops found me. That’s what woke me up, I don’t know how long I would have been walking if no one drove by.” He inadvertently shivered, gooseflesh prickled his skin at the memory of the wind. He cranked the heat in the car up another notch. “Winston was with me, he followed me the whole time.”

“Next time you see him, give him my thanks. And perhaps the officers as well.” There was a smile in Hannibal’s tone, it put Will at ease. The night had been horrible, it felt like a tipping point at the time, but maybe it was something he could get through unscathed. Hannibal seemed concerned, but not to the point of recommending self-admission to a treatment center, and Will trusted him.

He let Hannibal guide him gently into a conversation about his pack, putting names to the furry faces that Hannibal likely didn’t actually care about. He faked it well though, and it eased Will’s frayed wits. Before he felt any real time passing, he was at the doctor’s door, greeted by the sight of the man sleep-soft. His hair wasn’t coiffed and this was the first time Will had seen him in anything other than a three-piece suit.

He proposed coffee from his french press with a quick hand on Will’s shoulder that he couldn’t help but lean into. ‘Post-traumatic stress’ was what he offered along with coffee with just the right amount of homemade creamer. It made sense honestly, Jack knew, or at least should know by now, what seeing these scenes did to him week after week.

By the time his cellphone rang, he could almost claim he had recovered from his night. Hannibal made him breakfast at his own insistence, somehow more delicious than the first one they shared. It warmed him from the inside out, chasing away the lingering cold that he hadn’t been able to shake all morning. It was that feeling of…almost safety that Jack Crawford broke to once again subject him to the newest horror. Like a proud tom cat, laying a dead bird at a scared child’s feet.

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This all started as a favor to Jack. Maybe he wasn't the most stable man in the world when he was just teaching, but he was a hell of a lot more than he was now. Jack really did just see him as a tool to use however he pleased. Will wasn’t one of his agents, he didn’t technically have to bow to the man’s authority, but despite his harsh words, he was right. No matter the strain of the case, there were still lives that needed to be saved.

That was why Will kept his mouth shut and brushed past him. He gave a quick apology that he didn’t mean and forced himself to look at the newest present from the angelmaker.

For this installation, the victim had his arms splayed, no longer grasped in prayer. He was suspended entirely with fishing line, not an easy feat considering the man looked to be around 200 pounds. The pendulum swung once, twice, three times and early evening settled.

The first thing he noticed was the familiarity, not to other killers, but to himself. It was strange seeing similarities to Will Graham's mind while inside another's. This killer could see, or believed he could see the innards of the people around him without them knowing. Where Will could see their inner workings, their mindsets, this angelmaker could see their sin, bright on their faces like a beacon.

He was tired, hoping he wouldn't be alerted to another sinner when the security guard came into view. He allowed himself a moment to feel his resignation before he pursued the wicked man. With practiced hands he restrained him, strung him up before he regained consciousness. A final tug of wire exposed the sinner's wings and finally he could ascend.

The angels I have made are finished, and now to bestow the ascension upon myself.

Will didn't pull himself out quick enough to save himself from the pain. The mutilation of such a sensitive area caused agony that was acute, sharp, and *horrible*. Will ran back from the scene and around the corner to dry heave. He could empathize with anyone, there was a reason he chose the killers and not the victims, at least when he could. Gradually, he struggled his way back to himself and forced reality to beat down his imagination once again.

He left as soon as he spat the scene out to Jack, dodging questions from the team and eager reporters. The dreams this killer would inspire would be particularly horrible, another reason to avoid sleep.

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Almost a week later, a thin woman with eye bags as big as his sat gingerly in front of him in Jack's office- Elliot Buddish's wife. The man's DNA hadn't been in the system, but his recent disappearance, brain tumor, and habits as described by his wife all matched the profile Will built. Mrs. Buddish was scared, confused, and felt overwhelmingly guilty. As she spoke she trembled slightly, like she was stopping herself from crying.

Will could understand why. Before all this, before the brain tumor took her husband, he was a caring man, her soulmate too. Quiet, but with a dedication to her and their family. He'd been a pillar for her that crumbled into dust within the span of a couple of months, and she'd been forced to shut him out to protect their children, so they wouldn't remember their father as a man lost to madness.

Jack stiffened at her description of their killer's cancer. It was only for a brief moment that Will's attention was drawn, but his own realization came only a second after Jack's. The angelmaker was personal to him too, or maybe it was more Mrs. Buddish, but he was losing someone to the same struggle. Likely his wife. He couldn't entirely forgive Jack's hand in the decline of Will's sanity, but he could at least understand his actions now.

“What kind of mother exposes her children to someone who is losing their mind?” The end of Mrs. Buddish’s monologue threw Will’s anxieties back home violently. That was what he was doing, wasn’t it? Trying to expose Abigail to his lunacy? His symptoms weren’t getting better, he hadn’t awoken down any roads again, but the other night found him standing on the edge of his second story roof. The stag from his dreams was making nightly visits, he could sometimes still hear the clop of its hooves when he woke. He was in no way capable of being her caregiver.

Hannibal was right, the process of becoming her guardian continued at a snail’s pace. Who knows how bad he’d get by the end if he was declining this rapidly, he didn’t want to expose her to that. He had to make a choice, either stop pursuing the killers that were driving him over the edge in the possibility it would fix whatever was wrong with him, or allow Jack to push him until he broke.

Whatever he chose, he still had to finish this case, Buddish sat heavy in his skull. Hopefully resolution would quiet him.

“I don’t know how much longer I can be all that useful to you, Jack.” There was his decision, it was selfish but he was melting from the inside out. If he could make Jack understand how much looking did, maybe he could convince him to let Will go.

“Really? You caught the last three we had.”

“No, I didn’t catch this one. Elliot Buddish surrendered.” There was something tapping at the back of Will’s head behind the fire, but now wasn’t the time to explore a hunch. “It’s getting harder and harder to make myself look.”

“Well no one’s asking you to look alone.”

“But I *am* alone!” No one would stand by his side at the scene and stop him from falling apart, no one could even see that his seams were splitting. How was anyone supposed to know when all they saw was the passive mask he wore to every one of these scenes? The only person who could read him clearly enough was Hannibal, and Will wanted to keep him as far away from here as possible. “And you know what looking at this does.”

“I know what happens if you don’t look, and so do you.” Will wanted to snap at him. People would die no matter what he did, the FBI wasn’t in the business of catching killers before the act.

“I can make myself look but the thinking is shutting down.” The cases piled on top of eachother, each throwing a bucket of water into his tank that would eventually drown him. How many lives could he save before his was beyond saving? How many cases until he broke? It was probably far fewer than Jack was hoping.

“You want to go back to your lecture hall?”

“No, I don’t. But that may be what I have to do. This is bad for me.” Hannibal thought it was okay if he was selfish, if at least temporarily he put himself first. Will wished he was here so he could talk to Jack. He had a way of reasoning that was irrefutable, Jack wouldn’t be able to guilt him into drowning himself if he had his paddle.

“I’m not your father, Will. I’m not gonna tell you what you ought to do.”

“Seems like that’s exactly what you’re gonna do.”

“You go back to your classroom, when there’s killing going on that you could’ve prevented, it will sour your classroom forever.” Jack spoke with a confident surety. Will was malleable, spineless in the face of the guilt Jack offered.

“Maybe,” He wished he could steal a little of that confidence, but the words sounded hollow even to him. “And then maybe I’ll find a job as a diesel mechanic in a boat yard.”

“You wanna quit? Quit.” There was no room for argument. Jack left him with Elliot Buddish’s body knowing Will would see the next one. He couldn’t quit, he deluded himself into thinking that he could. As long as he remembered the joy of killing Hobbs he would continue to force himself to look at the scenes. Maybe he could repent enough one day, but it would not be any time soon.

As if he could sense Will’s resignation, Buddish appeared in front of him as soon as Jack left him alone in the barn. He hadn’t heard the tell-tale thump of him falling from the lines criss-crossing the rafters, but he was there, kneeling at Will’s feet.

He could *see* Will. And Will could see him seeing him. He saw himself through Buddish’s eyes and saw his own head wreathed in fire. The angelmaker’s mark of a sinner. He saw Will’s violence and pleaded to be able to free him from it, to transform Will into another angel.

It took Will far too long to realize he’d hallucinated. It was only when Buddish collapsed to the floor and failed to make a sound did he see him swaying fifteen feet off the ground again.

He wanted to call Hannibal but Jack was right outside. The scene would soon be flooded with forensics, cleaners, and reporters; it would be hours before Will was alone again.

A short call couldn’t hurt. Just five minutes to help him calm down. His breath was coming in quick puffs, his head hurt. His phone was ringing in his ear before he could think better of it.

“Hello Will,” Hannibal picked up on the third ring.

Will was quiet for a beat too long, he swore he saw Buddish’s eyes shift under his closed lids.

“Will? Are you all right?”

“Hannibal…” His voice came out in a soft sigh. Buddish’s wings vibrated like an insect’s. “We found him, the angelmaker I mean.”

“Did something happen?”

“He killed himself, made himself holy.”

“Strung up like one of his angels?”

“Yeah, I saw him though. Alive, moving.” Will’s breath came out in quick puffs of hot steam, it swirled above his head, it ebbed and flowed with the beating of the angel’s wings. Each gasp of air was loud in the silence of the barn.

“Another hallucination?”

“Yes *another* hallucination,” Like it was normal, like his reality wasn’t falling apart. “I can’t keep this up much longer.”

“If you don’t fix the source of your stress, you will continue to have these adverse reactions.”

“I talked to Jack, just now. I tried to quit but…” He trailed off. The space between the legs of the floating corpse began to fuse, apart, together, apart, and back together again. With the spread arms and beating wings, the fused legs looked like the slender abdomen of a yellow jacket.

“You were guilted into staying.” Hannibal’s voice drowned out the thrum of the beating wings. Will wanted to fall into it.

“I wasn’t *guilted* into this. I’m saving people, their lives are more important.” That’s what Jack said, what everyone said. His empathy was only a ‘gift’ if it was used for the greater good. It didn’t feel good now, not with the feeling of the skin on his back flayed.

“Is that what you believe or what Jack believes?”

“It's the *right* thing to believe.”

“I don’t believe it right that you sacrifice your life for others, Will.”

He didn’t have a response, so he didn’t offer one. Pain burst in the palm of his hand that wasn’t clenching his phone, his nails dug into the soft flesh there. Buddish’s skin seemed so pale that it was almost see through. Like a cicada's shed. Hannibal sighed on the other end of the line, one of resignation, but there was no pity. There never was with him.

“Is your angelmaker still moving now?”

“Yeah, his eyes are twitching under the lids. His wings are beating too.”

“The visions still persist though you know they are an impossibility.”

“It feels like I’m dreaming. And my dreams feel so much like reality. I never know where I am anymore, I can’t trust my eyes. I can’t trust anything to be real.” He didn’t shout, the panic creeping in was slowly crawling up him like a colony of flesh-eating ants. He felt them

crawling up his legs, his hands shook. His breathing was quick, it felt like it was almost in time with the flutter of the angel's wings.

"Will? Will listen to me, you are having a panic attack. Listen to my voice," Hannibal didn't have to tell him, it was all he wanted to do at the moment. "I need you to breathe in slowly. Good, now hold there. Close your eyes, wade into the stream. Breathe out." He let Hannibal guide him down, his breathing started to even, though he didn't open his eyes. The stream was cool and Hannibal's calming voice seemed to come from everywhere, the flowing water, the oak trees, the young bucks watching, the overcast sky. He unclenched his hands muscle by muscle and almost dropped his phone in the process.

Minutes passed and eventually the panic subsided, Will hesitantly opened his eyes. Buddish's eyes were still fluttering, but his legs had separated. The only sensation on his own legs was the material of his mud-stained jeans.

"Will? Has the lion given up its chase?"

"For now," He tried to chuckle but the sound that came out was barely more than a swift exhale. "Though I'm still not sure I'm awake."

"We will go over some grounding techniques in our next session. In the meantime, is there anything I can do to ensure that if you are indeed in a dream, it's a pleasant one?" Heat spread to Will's face, he shook off the implication before it could take hold.

"Just…talk to me. About anything."

"Recently, I've been experimenting with pescatarian desserts. Seafood is underutilized in traditional final courses and I find myself eager to attempt new creations and substitutes. Maybe you shall even give me angling tips one of these days so I may procure my own stock." The last dregs of anxiety drained out of his body as Hannibal continued to speak. He let the words flow through him, not really registering, but he didn't seem to mind Will's lack of response.

Finally, after Hannibal had recounted the full preparation of some sort of pastry featuring trout that Will couldn't imagine would taste good, but Hannibal would undoubtedly make delicious, he felt enough like a person to leave the barn. They exchanged quick goodbyes, Will gave a soft "thank you" that he was sure went unheard, but Hannibal left him with "You're welcome dear Will, I shall see you on Friday."

He staggered outside, their phone call had lasted almost thirty minutes.

Chapter End Notes

i prommy i like jack even tho im not nice to him in this fic

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He tugged at the turtleneck collar of his athletic undershirt. It wasn't hot but it was sweat soaked already. His flannels alone had become stifling over the last few weeks as his brain continued to melt, but the undershirt was necessary. The mark had grown again; it spanned the width of his entire chest and grazed the very bottom of his sternum. The worst of it though, were the tines that crawled up the base of his neck along his jugular veins. The twin black points just barely peeked over the low collar of his shirts, hence the turtlenecks he'd been forced to invest in.

Hopefully it didn't get any larger, Will was worried that it'd grow to cover his entire body at this rate.

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane didn't help his nervous sweats. Will knew he'd have more in common with the inmates than the staff, though with a chief of staff like Frederick Chilton, that wasn't much of a compliment.

He was a pompous ass of a man who thought that wearing expensive suits and name-brand watches would give him class. His framed PhD and PsyD were placed so they bordered his head when he sat at his too-large desk. He looked like Hannibal's cheap knock-off, though it left a sour taste in Will's mouth to even attempt to compare them.

Chilton had probably met Hannibal before, it was likely considering their professions. Also, he wasn't creative enough to come up with the whole 'talented ex-surgeon turned polished psychiatrist' schtick all on his own. Will bet both his kidneys that he wasn't even that good of a surgeon, he probably left the field before they let him near an operating table. He doubted his psychiatry was much better.

Will hated him immediately, almost as much as he hated Lounds. If only Chilton's pet ripper turned on him rather than the night nurse.

Chilton was barely hiding his excitement, masking it poorly with sympathy for the employee that died on his watch. He was a selfish man, elated to prove himself when he failed to assist the FBI's attempts to catch the ripper two years ago.

Will almost welcomed the sight of the body just so he could be away from Chilton and his probing questions. He seemed to think he was entitled to examine the way Will thought , excited to be the first to properly scrutinize Will's brand of crazy. Will was used to being looked at through a clinical lens, though most weren't this overt.

The nurse was dead before the mutilation started, but not before Gideon plucked her eyes from her head, so at least the sadism was present. That's where the similarities ended though. Will had used ripper kills for his lectures for years, he was familiar with his condescending artistry. This wasn't that. The ripper had no interest in repeating one of his own kills, it would

bore him. The organs were vital, whatever he was doing with them was as intrinsic to his design as the theatrical displays, if not moreso. If Gideon was truly the ripper and he'd been prevented from killing for two years, he wouldn't have left them alone and mostly intact.

With three pendulum swings, Will sunk into the scene. The first thing he felt, other than the slit in his hand where Gideon stored the pick that released him from his handcuffs, was a nervous excitement tinged with curiosity. The surety was missing. Gideon had never killed like this before, but he was eager to see if he was able to, if he was capable of it.

The woman struggled, but he was larger and experienced. He tested the feeling of her disconnected eyes, rolled them around in the palm of his hands, coating them in an even layer of blood. They were less firm than he expected, not stiffened like those in the dissections he performed in grad school.

The first tool entered her neck, killing her in less than a minute. He felt a sort of passion in her suffering but it wasn't…personal enough. She hadn't affronted Gideon, not like his cheating wife and ungrateful family, this wasn't his design. He wanted it to be though. Maybe the elation, the rightness to his actions that may trigger a memory would kick in if he embedded enough medical supplies in the right spots. They slotted in like pieces of a puzzle, but he had to take the time to examine each piece closely, it didn't come from muscle memory.

He gasped back to reality as Gideon released his control. He wasn't the ripper, but he was trying to convince himself he was. He wouldn't have been so careful and so rattled with nervous anticipation if he truly was who he claimed. The real ripper would have felt confident, sure, he wouldn't have had to think when he was creating this scene. It would have felt as natural as breathing to him.

Will wondered if he had inadvertently let the real ripper into his psyche. There was a small voice in his head that was offended that his masterpieces were being attributed to this forger. If this got out, if the real ripper found this plagiarism, there'd be hell to pay. He'd do more than just leave a body (or three, if his usual pattern stuck).

Gideon's mental state was a mess. Either his time imprisoned had broken him or he was subject to very unorthodox psychiatry practices. Will suspected both. Chilton would likely know more, but the man wouldn't accept any reality besides the one he convinced himself was true- that he'd caught the ripper and through his 'genius,' got him to admit his crimes.

There would be deaths following this. Will couldn't blame himself this time, they would all be on Chilton's hands. And Jack's once he realized he could use this to provoke the real ripper.

___

Hannibal's home seemed more at-ease in the natural dark of evening. The morning light he'd seen the home bathed in last cast irregular beams of sun rays that didn't emphasize the subtle, dark decor. Will and the faded red cooler he was toting stained the pristine aesthetic of the whole place. His watch showed it was five after seven.

“Hey, sorry I’m late.”

“Nonsense, I just finished the prep work.” The overcoat of Hannibal’s three-piece suit was replaced with an apron tied tight on his hips. The cuffs of his high-collared shirt were folded precisely, revealing forearms more defined than his sedentary profession would suggest.

He led Will to his kitchen and immediately he knew that this was the beating heart of the home. There were no knick-knacks or non-functional decor, but the room still teemed with personality. Every steel surface was polished, though it spoke more of care and an obsession with cleanliness rather than disuse. It was large enough to be the kitchen of an upscale bistro, he could easily see ten chefs bustling around with ample space to work. Currently, there was only the island and a few burners in use. Hannibal had set up little glass bowls containing herbs and spices while something boiled on a low simmer. Two untouched cutting boards sat at the central station with wickedly sharp knives perched on them at perfectly right angles.

“What are we making exactly?” Hannibal took the cooler and drew out the fish one by one. There were two good-sized largemouth bass, along with some fat pickerels and bluegills. He appraised each fish carefully and set the bass on the cutting boards with a satisfied nod.

“These are fine fish, thank you again. We’re making Cacciucco alla Livornese, a northern Italian fish stew.” Will watched him enter his walk-in cold room and return bearing fresh octopus and shrimp. The tentacles were still attached to the main body and the little crustaceans still had their legs and antennae. “Typically the dish is made with solely saltwater catches but today we’re using a few freshwater substitutes. It will have less of a salty taste as the fish have not marinated their whole lives in seawater, but I find that the meat of inland fish tends to exemplify each catch’s unique flavor. Though of course it also varies between species, age, and location.”

“Sounds a bit more elegant than any fish stew I’ve had.”

“Perhaps, though I wouldn’t want to presume.” There was that tiny twitch of a smile on Hannibal’s face again. Will felt his own lips curl up in turn.

His host strode over to a tall cabinet that seemed only to contain different types of glassware. “What’s your poison?”

“Scotch, but I’m not picky.”

“Well you’re in luck then.” He retrieved a small barrel from the store room connected to the kitchen. “My own personal brew, though I’m afraid we do not live in the right part of the globe to collect the peat.” He poured Will a couple more fingers than was strictly polite, but he wouldn’t complain. It was rich and oaky, something he’d find on the top shelf of a bar he’d never be allowed into. He made a small appreciative sound as Hannibal poured himself his own glass.

“This is delicious, please tell me you have more.” Hannibal chuckled, a sound as dark and full-bodied as the whisky.

“Once we murder this barrel I have another, though I will have to stock up should these dinners become a regular occurrence.” Will hoped they did, the evening had barely begun and he already felt more relaxed than he had in days, maybe weeks.

“Alright, how do you want me to make myself useful?”

“The fish were more than enough, though I’m sure you know your way around a sharp edge?” He directed Will’s gaze to the deboning knife that sat at the head of one of the cutting boards. “If you could start with the bass. Please don’t discard the bones or offal though, I hate to see any of your hard work go to waste.”

He dutifully took the knife in hand. It was small, though perfectly balanced; it would work well for the delicate job of gutting and deboning. Idolly, he thought of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, *every part is honored, nothing goes to waste.*

He sliced into the fish and remembered the dream where he cut Abigail’s throat. His gaze fell back to Hannibal, now leaning over the stove starting the broth. He threw back another swallow of the scotch and did his best to relax into the practiced motion of preparing the fish.

As Will carefully worked through his duty, he watched Hannibal flit about the kitchen. He would finish chopping vegetables just in time to lift a pan from the burner, then coat ingredients in oil in a high drizzle. It was all precise, practiced, and overwhelmingly elegant. Often Will saw him checking on sizzling pans and boiling water and not watching the motion of his hands in front of him. There were no timers to be seen, everything seemed like muscle memory. He added little flourishes and twirls of the various knives he used, like he was dancing.

Maybe he was showing off a bit, but Will couldn’t blame him, this was an extension of him, where the man truly came alive. And he wanted to share this part of himself with Will. He felt warmth spread to the back of his neck.

Will deposited the bones in one small offered bowl and the guts in another and started on the next fish.

“How long have you been cooking for?” Will winced, that didn’t come out right. “I mean, cooking like this.”

Hannibal gave him a fond look. “There was a time in my life when food was not so plentiful, so every meal became a delicacy. I vowed at that time to appreciate every offering I gave myself and it has transformed into a passion of mine. I would say I was around sixteen when I began to pursue the more extravagant, though I have always appreciated the process that goes into making a good meal. It’s very satisfying to me to procure as many of the ingredients as possible by my own hand.”

Will wondered if he was referring to his time spent in the orphanage or before then. The image of a young boy, ashen blonde hair, skinny enough to see his individual ribs, flashed behind his eyelids. It didn’t fit with the broad man hiding corded muscle under luxurious

suits, but it seemed Hannibal worked very hard to leave his past firmly behind him. Will caught himself looking at the man's exposed forearms once again.

"How much of this meal have you been able to 'procure with your own hand?'"

"Everything except the additive saltwater fish, if you count your own catches towards my tally."

"Even the other courses? I thought I saw some cuts of prosciutto among the vegetables you have out."

There was that playful twinkle in his eyes again. "I employ an ethical butcher who allows me to choose the pig, it is the closest I can achieve to my own hand without raising the beasts myself."

Will laughed, of course Hannibal did. He was so facetious about his cooking, of course he would want to control as many aspects of it as he could. It was a little surprising that he allowed Will's inexperienced hands and offers into his kitchen so readily.

"Alright I'll give you that one."

"And what of you? Angling is obviously not a recent skill of yours."

"Trying to find more ammunition to use during our sessions Dr. Lecter?" There was no bite in his words, he was *teasing* , he couldn't remember the last time he did that. It was strange, it wasn't often he felt genuinely relaxed with another person.

"I wouldn't dream of it, though I remind you we are just having conversations."

"Yeah yeah of course, just friendly conversations." They were more to him than that, they both knew it, but this would be pretty unprofessional if Will was fully his patient. He didn't even think he wanted to be Hannibal's patient. It was so much easier to accept if he was just going to a friend for some help. He hoped Hannibal considered him something closer to a friend. "Food was scarce for us too, not all the time, but enough that it was just easier to go down to the stream behind the trailer park to catch something rather than try to scrape together enough money for the night's meal. I don't know how old I was, young enough that I couldn't properly hold my father's good fishing rod so at first I had to use one I'd whittled. That first rod didn't catch much."

"I'd taken up a similar practice when I was about that age, though it hadn't occurred to me to try fishing. I would fashion crude traps and spears to hunt with. It was mindless in a way that wasn't all unpleasant." For once someone regarded his rough upbringing without pity. Will was proud of that old rod in a sad, nostalgic sort of way, and he could tell Hannibal had similar feelings about his own childhood. He wouldn't pry into how his friend, who reeked of old money, ended up in that same desperate situation, but it was nice to talk to someone who understood.

"Did you find joy in it as a child? Hunting I mean?"

“My first hunt was euphoric, it changed me. I was more…driven at the time than I am now, but it's a hobby I still take great pride in. Though I’ll admit, it's been a couple years since a real inspiration to take it up again has struck.”

Will recalled the first time he brought in a fish big enough for a meal. His father had been away for a few days and Will was just old enough to be entirely on his own. He hadn’t known what he was doing and he almost ruined the meat a few times, but he was careful and proud and the fish tasted far better having caught and prepared it himself. It was the first meal he’d had that day, which made the skinny brook trout all the more delicious. He wondered if that first hunt was the same for Hannibal, something born of desperation, tinged with a sense of accomplishment.

“I imagine hunting is a lot more exciting than fishing. It’s more of a relaxation technique than anything else for me these days.”

“It can be, though there’s a certain serenity I find in it. There’s far more waiting involved than one would imagine, and it’s in those moments between action where I can fully let go of the stressors of the day. Animals can sense an anxious mind, so to have a successful hunt one must immerse himself fully into his role of pursuer. You would make a great hunter, Will. Your empathy would allow you to slip into the beast’s skin easily.” There was a wistful awe in his tone that left Will a little breathless. In a strange way, Will felt flattered, and it did sound tranquil if hunting truly was what Hannibal described. It wasn’t the macho testosterone-fuelled competition that he’d always imagined, though the piercing noise of a rifle was something he could do without.

“I can’t imagine you using a gun, or wearing bright orange for that matter.” He let out a snort at the image of Hannibal in a camo jumpsuit and reflective orange gear, it just didn’t fit.

He gave Will another playful little grin. “I use whatever means I have available, but you are correct. Guns are…impersonal and I prefer other methods.” In a strange sort of way, Will did get it. There was a reason he chose the profession he did, he’d always been engrossed in the beauty and savagery of death, of killing. He was attracted to it though it made him feel grossly guilty.

“You prefer it to be personal?”

“Don’t you? Doesn’t it seem a tad rude to not let your prey see the face of its killer?”

“It does. It is. If I were to hunt, I’d like it to be personal.”

“I hope I can take you some day.” Hannibal seemed wistful and sincere, but he wasn’t making any plans. Will didn’t know what it meant, but his imagination ran wild. He could see himself and Hannibal running silently through the forests of Wolf Trap, chasing an undefined prey through the underbrush. It appealed to that wild part of him that delighted in the knife in his hand, that enjoyed killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs, that thought the grotesque mark on his chest was beautiful.

In his hunter’s fantasy, the collars of Hannibal’s shirt were loose and disorderly for once, revealing a matching mark. Will recoiled at his own traitorous thoughts, and firmly shoved

them away. Hannibal Lecter, in all his composed regal grace, was not a match for the sweaty insanity that made up Will Graham.

“I’d like that, I think.”

Will finished deboning the fish and Hannibal poured him another glass of scotch. He directed him to cut the filets into neat slices then add them to the bubbling broth. The smell was mouthwatering. They fell into an easy silence as the last few ingredients were added and the soup became more of a thick stew. Hannibal exchanged their whiskey with a light white Bordeaux and led them to the dining room. The table was already set with dark natural decor and two place settings at the head and right of the head of the table.

“It’s only the two of us Hannibal, you didn’t need to do all this.” The heat on his neck climbed to his ears, he was suddenly glad that he’d chosen to make himself more presentable than usual tonight. Hopefully there was no sweat visible through his deep blue collared shirt, he could definitely feel some gathered on his back, under the thin turtleneck.

“No meal is complete without proper setting. And this is your first time dining at my table, I wanted to make a good impression.” Will could see why everyone was so taken with him, he was charming in that maddeningly polite way of his.

His cooking was impeccable as always. Will wanted to say that he'd chosen the wrong profession but that would require him to stop tasting Hannibal’s offering, which was the last thing he wanted to do right now. He had to bite his tongue so he didn’t let out a sound that was completely indecent.

He looked up and saw Hannibal watching him with a particular intensity that turned the skin on his forearms to gooseflesh. Once more, Will raised his soup spoon to his mouth and allowed an appreciative noise to pass his lips this time. Hannibal gave another pleased twitch of his lips and finally turned some attention to his own bowl.

He likes to feed people.

Interesting, though not surprising. Will heard that the man frequently hosted dinner parties and had invited Jack to his table on more than one occasion. He should have taken him up on the offer sooner.

With every new course, Hannibal would wait a beat until he saw Will’s initial reaction to the food. It was almost…sweet if such a word could be applied to someone like him. It was as if he was making sure Will liked his offering, hoping for his approval. Or maybe it was something more self-congratulating, seeing the satisfaction of something perfectly executed. Will still had a hard time reading his motivations, he wasn’t even really sure the true purpose of his visit tonight, if there even was one.

They did not speak much over the meal, others may not have noticed the holy veneer that dining had in Hannibal’s psyche, but Will did. He didn’t want platitudes and niceties to ruin the atmosphere the two of them worked to create. Hannibal described the courses he brought out one by one and Will gave his honest compliments, but that was the extent of it.

By the end of the meal he was entirely sated, sleepy with fullness, wine, and whiskey. They retreated to his sitting room, close to the fire, though the large house wasn't lacking in warmth.

"Abigail asks about you sometimes. Either during my visits or when she comes to me when she hops the fence. She tells me you've been visiting less and less." Now there was something to wake him up.

"Jack has kept me busy lately, but also I don't think I'd be good company right now."

"She seems to disagree. And that she'd be happy if you taught her how to fish." He was caught between the intense hope he vowed to crush and a displaced resentment. It wasn't Hannibal's fault that his brain was melting, that his sanity was slipping through his fingers like sand because he couldn't say no to Jack.

"I'm losing my mind Hannibal. I've held it together pretty well tonight, but with every scene Jack drags me to it gets worse. I can't subject her to that. Even if they declared me sane enough to be one of her legal guardians, I can't let her see me in that state. She doesn't need another crazy father."

"Abigail's on the cusp of adulthood Will, what she needs are people that will protect her from her past and give her a way forward. Jack still suspects her of crimes she did not commit and he's not the only one who is out for her blood. Your stress is getting to you, and you're showing symptoms, yes, but you are one of her protectors, and I know you do not wish to cast aside that role so readily."

Will pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes and pulled his hair in a tight fist. Hannibal, of course, was right. He never wanted to abandon Abigail, but wasn't this better for her? Taking himself out of her life? Hannibal didn't think so, both he and Abigail liked him for some reason. Will had been proud of his role as her protector, hurting people who wanted to hurt her felt *good.* He felt guilty that it did, but here he was being given the offer to continue the role, and really who else would do it if not him?

"You're right, of course you're right. I'll visit her again this week. But Hannibal..?" His voice petered out before he finished his question."

"Yes Will?" His head cocked to the side, just like Winston's does.

"Do you…do you think you would come with me? To see her?" Hannibal's dark eyes softened with another upwards twitch of his lips.

"Of course, it would be my pleasure." He hummed and sipped from his glass- water this time- to avoid having to meet Hannibal's heavy gaze. It wasn't unkind, but Will wasn't used to looks of softness and warmth. From the set of the muscles on his face, this also wasn't an expression Hannibal was used to wearing.

"...Thank you, I've monopolized enough of your time tonight though. I should get going." It was too much suddenly. Hannibal's steadfast acceptance, his understanding, the tantalizing

company he offered, it was all too much, too tempting. If Will stayed any longer he'd get wrapped up in his fantasy, confusing it with reality.

"Are you feeling well enough to drive? I have a guest bedroom that is perfectly serviceable." This wouldn't be half as difficult if Hannibal didn't seem to genuinely enjoy his company so much. The idea that his signature blend of awkwardness, dark musings, and abrasive personality would draw someone to him rather than put them off was utterly addictive. He couldn't even blame his empathy tailoring his personality to suit Hannibal because he still couldn't fucking *read* the man. Which meant it was 100% Will Graham alone that he wanted to spend the night in his home. That last thought brought heat to his cheeks with meaning he didn't intend. *But maybe he didn't not intend either.*

"No, I mean yes I'm okay to drive. I had a lovely time tonight. I really have to feed the dogs though." No he didn't, he fed them before he drove over, Hannibal probably knew he was lying. "Goodnight, Hannibal."

"If you're sure." He walked Will to the door like the gentleman he was. "Goodnight, Will."

It was only when Will was five minutes away from Hannibal's home that he realized he forgot to grab his cooler.

Chapter End Notes

he says the most thinly veiled shit in the show its hilarious

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will *told* Jack this would happen, he'd point it out too if the man didn't look so haunted. Over a week ago, when Jack proposed the idiotic idea, Will told him the real ripper would hit him where it hurt the most. And Will had no doubt that this was the work of the ripper, even if Lass *didn't* have a connection to him, it would have still been obvious. It was insulting, impactful, and *personal* ; he hadn't even needed a new victim. Jack already mourned the loss of Miriam Lass and now the ripper forced him to mourn her a second time, right after giving him just enough hope that she might have still lived.

Really this couldn't have come at a worse time for Jack. He was a strong man, but the decline of his wife's health was taking a toll. He didn't say so, but the potential rescue of Lass was something he foolishly let himself hope for when he couldn't save Bella.

There was something that bothered Will though, where was the rest of her? Lass was different from the ripper's other victims, he hadn't wanted to humiliate her, he wanted to taunt Jack. That's why he only displayed a piece of her, so the focus wouldn't be on the dead trainee, but rather just her body part. Was whatever the ripper was doing with the organs, did he do the main body of Miriam Lass? Was she unique enough to him that she earned special treatment?

Will didn't know, this scene, like the copycat's, was frustratingly quiet.

Jack hadn't barked any orders in almost five minutes, he just stared blankly at Lass's arm. His eyes flicked briefly to Will's and he saw the first sign of guilt he'd ever detected in the man. He saw himself, eyes blurred over in death, his skin sallow and graying, his arm severed and no longer oozing blood with the lack of a beating heart to circulate it. Jack looked like he was about to say something, but he turned away before anything came out. Figures, no matter how guilty the man felt, the job always came first. Even if he lost an agent or two in the process.

He gave Jack his insight without going under, not that Will told him so. Jack wouldn't care that the ripper was a mystery to him and that he couldn't empathize with an arm, he only cared about results.

Will left shortly after, Jack only gave him a brief nod in passing. Beverly caught his arm as he passed. Her fingertips brushed right where Lass's upper arm was severed.

"Hey uh," Her normally confident voice was quiet. She looked sideways at her superior, still mildly catatonic staring at the arm. "Do you think he's gonna be alright? Well, as alright as any of us can be after this."

Beverly didn't know about Mrs. Crawford or else she wouldn't be asking. "Jack won't get knocked down from this, if anything he'll push harder."

“I know, that's what I'm worried about. You can only push so far until something breaks.”

Will just gave a noncommittal hum. Beverly shot him a pointed look, she wasn't just talking about Jack. He chose to ignore it.

He didn’t necessarily need to drive back to headquarters, it would take at least a day for all the evidence to get processed and for the arm to end up down in forensics, but the familiar space helped him think.

This was the first, though certainly wouldn’t be the last, ripper scene he’d analyzed in person. He, and honestly most of the trainees looking to go into homicide, had read the scenes and profiles of ripper victims for years before this batch. In fact, Will was still teaching at Quantico when the last sounder occurred. He remembered the atmosphere at the time, so tense, everyone bustling around trying to find any usable evidence before the country’s most prolific at-large serial killer went underground again for a few months. With Lass declared missing and thought the last of the sounder, headquarters became even more frantic. Though, of course, there was nothing to be done. The ripper wouldn’t start leaving traces at his installations, especially after directly confronting the FBI.

He pulled his laptop towards him and opened the presentation he’d used for the last two years when giving his series of lectures on the ripper. It needed updating.

In the privacy of his empty classroom, Will could admit he had a sort of admiration for the man, like a citizen of Pompeii might admire Mt. Vesuvius. He was as destructive as he was artistic, his installations were horrible but Will didn’t think they were created with the intent to strike fear, though the ripper probably enjoyed the side effect.

This was a man who saw genuine beauty in suffering and held a large appreciation for the inner workings of the human body. Nothing was a compulsion for him, he struck only when he felt inspired, which was why the time frame was inconsistent and prone to vary. Every aspect of his design was an investigator’s worst nightmare, consistency led to capture. The ripper knew that.

His only consistencies were basically useless anyways- sadism and removal of organs. Sadism wasn’t something tangible they could follow and likely it was a practice the ripper reserved for the people he slaughtered, they wouldn’t find him abusing animals or in domestic violence cases.

The organs might have been more of a lead if any trace of them could be found, but of course, like all evidence that might lead to the man behind the moniker, they were missing completely.

Will thought back to the scene as he finished the presentation. There was something off about it, and it wasn’t just the missing body of Lass. Oddly, he felt as if he’d seen the artist somewhere else, like he’d already witnessed a ripper body. Which obviously wasn’t true, he wouldn’t forget something so wickedly unique, but maybe it was his years of examining him from afar that brought the familiarity? That didn’t seem right, it almost felt like he’d tasted that cruelty that permeated the air above Lass’s severed arm before.

It was late now and he still had the nearly two hour drive back to Wolf Trap to bear. He packed up his things and left his barren classroom before the ripper could dig his claws any further into Will's skull.

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Jack was losing it. Will wasn't really one to talk but the man was seeing the ripper everywhere. Other killers didn't just leave because the big bad was back, if anything it would inspire them to pump out more bodies. Jack had been doing this job for over two decades, he'd seen nearly every recorded ripper kill first hand, he should know when he saw one by now.

The body in the hotel bathtub wasn't one of the ripper's victims, Jack should have seen that right when he walked in. There was no intention here, it was artless, accidental. There was no picture being painted, no witty take away, it was just a dead man missing a kidney.

"How do you see the ripper?" Jack didn't want Will's honest opinion, so he gave him one version of it.

"I see him as one of those pitiful things sometimes born in hospitals. They feed it, but don't put it on the machines, leave it to die. But he doesn't die." The ripper was a sharp-toothed monster born into the body of a man. He knew this and embraced his nature with open arms, he never deluded himself into believing he was among the masses. Though, he knew he was a part of human society even if he was an ascended being. "He looks normal. And no one can tell what he is."

It wasn't narcissism that fueled the ripper, though the man was certainly self-gratifying. It was confidence, crafted from years honing his skill. He was a talented scuptor that gave every piece depth, intrigue, and layers of hidden meaning.

Will was envious of him to a certain extent. To possess that sense of self, to know one's purpose, terrible though it may be, with that level of clarity must be satisfying beyond belief.

There was grace too in every brutal detail, as if the ripper was performing a type of worship. A self-serving monster who prayed at his own altar, a lonely god with only one follower. Will wondered how he coped, despite his monstrosity he was still confined to the body of a man, one that sought intimacy and understanding just as any other.

He likely was unmarked. The majority of serial killers were and no matter what the current theory Jack and the team were chasing, the ripper worked alone. This organ harvester probably didn't even have a tangible connection to him, just got caught in the wide crosshairs.

If the ripper did have a mate however, Will couldn't imagine the type of person they'd have to be, to match the devil.

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Four more bodies dropped in less than a week. Will couldn't say for certain but only the first felt like the work of the organ harvester. The four that followed were all found after Freddie Lounds published her article claiming the first was the ripper's. He would have thought that after the Able Gideon incident, everyone would have a tad more discretion when throwing around the label, but apparently that was not the case.

If these new bodies were all attributed to the ripper, this would be the furthest escalation he'd attempted to date. Four bodies found in three days, taking different organs from each person. He left perfectly intact kidneys, hearts, and livers in some bodies, valuable cuts as far as organ harvesting goes, as if to mock them for thinking he was using them for a purpose so lacking in grace. One of the bodies was missing an entire brain, people didn't get brain transplants.

It was like the ripper was pointing out all the differences between himself and this newcomer that had the audacity to be attributed to his name, though it was likely that this organ harvester really didn't want the spotlight. The scene he left was an accident born from a lack of practical medical experience. He was an overconfident medical student, young and likely in debt. The ripper gave a fresh example of what a removed kidney looked like with his own scalpel, it just highlighted the difference between the two more drastically.

That familiarity he felt at the scene of the observatory pounded against his head. There was something, some sort of association he was supposed to make.

He stood between the corpse of the man found in the hotel and the man that was seated across from himself. This right here was the starkest example of the difference between the two killers, something about this itched at him, like he saw it before. He waved Beverly over from where she was reexamining the torn open sutures.

"What do you need?"

"The ripper always sends a message with his victims, either to humiliate the victim themself of the people trying to catch him."

"Or both," She replied with a half-grin.

"Or both. All I'm seeing here is part of a message, I feel like I'm missing something obvious, something we've seen before."

"The last time the ripper killed like this was two years ago. You were still a teacher, yeah? Do you remember something from then?"

"No, it feels more recent, but I really only have a feeling. The cuts on this body are less precise than the others, right?" He gestured towards the body found in the bathtub.

"Yes, you can see here that he nicked an artery. He might have been rushed, tipped off that his location was found."

"I don't think so, he's never had any close calls with any of his other victims and he's not keen on using sedatives. He's a sadist, he likes them awake when he cuts them open."

“There were traces of sedatives in Lass.” She wasn’t arguing to be contrary, Beverly actually understood that Will wasn’t there solely to shoot down other agents’ theories, hopefully Zeller was listening.

“She was different to him, that’s why he didn’t display all of her. He was impressed with her, she didn’t deserve humiliation.” Jack did, in his eyes.

“Alright, so what is it about these bodies that feels familiar?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s that there is a difference? He took the kidney along with the heart, what did the tissue around the heart look like?”

“In the first victim it’s torn and bruised, though the heart is still mostly intact despite it being manhandled. In the victim missing the organ, the surrounding tissue is remarkably unscathed, considering. The tissue surrounding the missing kidney in both is completely ruined though, but for different reasons. Mr. Still-has-a-heart has that nicked artery and the removal itself wasn’t clean, but the other guy shows distinct signs of tearing and breakage. It’s likely that’s because he was still conscious when he donated his kidney.” She lifted the flap of skin to show Will the torn insides, pointing to the disfigured tissue. “Why? Do you recognize something?”

“I don't know, maybe.”

“Well if you’re sure it's from a case you’ve helped us on, try going through them one by one? I dunno if it’ll help but that’s my best shot.” She flashed him a winning smile and went back to poking around the bodies in front of her. Really she was cut out for this job, she had just enough discretion to not get herself in real trouble, but she also kept her spirits high, and had a real drive for justice that didn’t steamroll people like Jack’s.

“I’ll try, thanks Bev.” For her, he did his best to manage his own half-grin. She shrugged her shoulder in a way that was supposed to convey a wave of ‘don’t mention it,’ which she probably would have attempted if she wasn’t digging through the sutures once again.

The first case he consulted for was the Minnesota shrike, during that time he witnessed two scenes attributed to Garrett Jacob Hobbs and one that was…shit. Will was a goddamn idiot.

He made his way quickly to file storage and found the cabinet for tabled active cases. His report on the copycat was easily located. He remembered everything he wrote, but the physical file cemented the idea that was forming. There was no evidence to back him up, so he couldn’t bring this to Jack, but the longer he thought about it the more it made sense.

The Chesapeake ripper was the copycat killer.

The timeline fit, the ripper got bored being ten steps ahead of the FBI so he postponed his hobby for a time to watch them flounder. He tried his hand at forgery, elevating another killer’s work through his design. He wanted to play a new game, to see if he could manipulate the FBI into finding a different murderer by showing them his negative. That was why this current batch felt so familiar, he was showing them the difference between this new killer and himself intentionally.

The new identity allowed him to kill again in this way, just to see if he could. A few months of entertainment passed and he got inspired again as the focus shifted back to his main identity.

He wanted to kick himself that he didn't see it sooner. The ripper and copycat scenes had the same quiet unreadability. The similarities started to pile up as soon as Will was looking for them: the presentation, the sadism, the goddamn *surgical removal of organs*.

He had one perfect moment of clarity before another realization hit him. His mark had stopped growing right before they discovered Miriam Lass's arm. It had steadily increased in size and detail ever since just before they found Cassie Boyle's body displayed in that field in Minnesota, and now it had finished growing as soon as Will got involved with the ripper.

The Chesapeake ripper was the copycat killer.

Which meant the Chesapeake ripper was Will's soulmate.

His legs started to tremble. He threw the file back in its cabinet before he could damage it any further in his clenched hands. He didn't sprint to his car but it was a close thing, the clop of the stag's hooves chased him down the hall and out to the parking lot.

With shaky hands he turned the radio to a random station and increased the volume until it rattled through his skull. It wasn't enough to drown out the panicked ruckus in his mind. He rolled down the windows despite it being less than 40 degrees out and bit the meat of his thumb with the hand that wasn't driving his car. This was stupid, this was how people got into car accidents, but he needed to flood his senses and be away from Quantico. He needed his stream, his dogs, Hannibal, *something* to ground him or maybe whisk him away to a fantasy land where he wasn't the soulmate of the fucking *Chesapeake ripper*.

Christ, what did that say about him then? That he could match a man that terrible?

He bit down on his thumb harder, the skin broke and the taste of coppery blood filled his mouth. Will tore the appendage from his mouth and tried to wipe it off on his jeans, but thick globs of red still oozed slowly; he swore and pressed it hard into the meat of his thigh to hopefully staunch the bleeding while he tore down the highway. The blood in his mouth was sweet, he'd always lapped up his own cuts and bleeding hands. When he was a child, he thought it made him like the dogs he found comfort in, right now he couldn't help but think the ripper would probably enjoy the taste of his blood too.

The stag stood proud in front of his speeding car, right in the middle of the highway. Will banked hard to the right to avoid a collision; it was only as his car caught the gravel lip that he realized there wouldn't have been a collision, he was hallucinating again.

The ditch was steep but not far down. His car rolled to a stop eventually, the radio was still blaring, Will's ears rang. The highway was empty, lucky because there'd been no one for him to hit. For a moment, his mind was perfectly blank as he sat in the driver's seat at the bottom of a ditch, his body felt like heavy stone, utterly dead to the world.

In a rush, sound and sight returned to him like a flashbang. The reality of what happened washed over him in waves of anxiety and exhaustion; he'd driven off the road to avoid hitting a hallucination. He was a *mess.*

The next waves of emotion were tinted bright red, anger and frustration saturated his veins. He wanted to hit something, pound something into paste with his bare fists. He wanted it to be the ripper for marking him. He wanted it to be himself for being compatible with a goddamned *serial killer.* Most of all, he wanted help. Someone to take control away from him for at least a minute.

He remembered the last time he felt such a frenzy of emotion, when he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. All he'd had to do was listen to Hannibal, he was more than capable of managing two bodies at once. He wished Hannibal was here now. He'd helped Will at the scene of Elliot Buddish, strung up in the rafters.

Almost on reflex, he dialed Hannibal's number once again. The ringing was almost painful in his skull, he belatedly remembered to turn the radio off. Five rings turned to six, seven, eight. No response. Will ended the call before Hannibal's voicemail could prompt him to leave a message.

Christ, what was he *doing?* He was an adult man, he didn't need Hannibal to clean up after every mess he made, he probably saw Will as more of a child than anything else.

His phone rang, *Dr. Hannibal Lecter* was proudly displayed on the screen. Will picked up with only a second of self-deprecating hesitation.

"Hello Will, I apologize for not picking up your call, I was showing a patient out. What can I do for you?" How had it taken this long for Will to remember that Hannibal had patients other than him, that he wasn't at Will's beck and call every minute of the day?

"Do you have another patient soon?"

"You've found me on a rather clear day, my final appointment is actually out of town at the moment. My attention is solely yours." Relief flowed into Will's bloodstream involuntarily. Hannibal had a stoic affectation but the warmth in his voice was still tangible, settling around Will's shoulders like a thick scarf.

"...I'm stuck in a ditch," He admitted. "I had another hallucination while I was driving home and I swerved off the road." A *swoosh* of movement crackled over the phone as soon as Will uttered the final word.

"Are you hurt? Where are you?" The distinctive sound of a door quickly closing followed Hannibal's concerned words.

"I'm alright, I didn't hit anything. I was driving home and caught the lip, the car's fine."

"Are you still experiencing the hallucination?" Will looked up, the stag was still standing in the road in his rearview mirror.

“Yes.” The beast just stood there in the bracing winter air, it was still aside from the huffs of hot breath that left its snout.

“Describe it to me.” Another sound of a shut door came from Hannibal’s end, a car’s this time. Will didn’t want to put him out, he could deal with this on his own, but he couldn’t help but want Hannibal here too.

“It's a stag, it follows me. I see it everywhere, I hear the clip of his hooves on the tile when I go to class. He has great antlers, black and branching, they seem like they would be wet if I touched them.”

“Dark, like blood in the moonlight.”

“My hand would come back coated. He has feathers in the scruff of his fur, black like a raven’s.”

“The beast is feathered and dipped in tar, is he meant to ridicule you Will?”

“I don’t think so. He doesn’t want me to resent him.”

“So what does the beast want?”

“I think he wants to be seen, acknowledged. He wants to indulge in every dark, profane musing and come home fat and sated. He wants hedonism, to entertain every whim and pass it off as instinct.”

“He’s your desire to be free of self restraint. A heady thing if one allows it in.”

“He’s terrifying, Hannibal. He’s huge and beautiful, but utterly horrible. I don’t know where this ends.”

“Try not to think of endings right now. I’ll be there soon Will, you needn’t worry.”

“You don’t…thanks.” Hannibal hadn’t given him the option of turning down his help, Will would’ve said no if he asked anyways. He detected no judgment in the doctor’s tone, he never had. Only the desire to support, just steadfastly offering an arm when he was in danger of stumbling.

“It’s my pleasure, always. I do not want to misplace the trust you have so graciously put in me.” Why did he have to make it sound like Will was doing *him* a favor? As if Will clumsily dragging him along his life was a welcome respite.

Will fell silent, his breaths were still loud in his ears, in time with the stag’s. He listened closely to the sounds on Hannibal’s end, though the noises coming from the smooth purr of his Bentley were soft.

“I have to make a few calls, will you be alright on your own for a short time?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

“No, I suppose not. Gather your things, I shall take you home once I arrive. I’ll see you soon Will.”

Will nodded before realizing Hannibal couldn’t see him. “Alright, see you soon.”

Once again he was left in the quiet of his own making. The stag continued to stare through his rearview mirror, but at the moment he couldn’t resent the company. Without Hannibal’s voice to steady him, his lonely panic might try to rise again.

His thumb was still bleeding sluggishly.

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Forty five minutes later- exactly as Will had seen every minute tick by- Hannibal pulled up behind him. He ushered Will into the warmth of his car, leaving Will’s behind.

“I’ve called a tow service, we shall pick it up tomorrow when you have finished with work.”

“And how am I supposed to get to Quantico?”

“I’ll drive you of course, I would not leave you stranded.”

“That’s so far out of your way, you don’t need to do this.” Will didn’t know if he was trying to convince Hannibal or himself. He *did* want the help, and Hannibal would not be swayed, but it felt wrong to just accept it so readily.

“You’re right. I don’t need to do this, I want to. And I rarely find myself denying my wants.”

“It can’t be that simple. I’m not exactly pleasant company, especially now. You could be doing anything else, with anyone else right now and I’m sure that it would be much more enjoyable.”

“Yet I still desire to be right here with you, right now. Had I been elsewhere and only heard of this incident at our next session, I would have regretted not being able to offer my support.” Hannibal wasn’t looking at him, his eyes were firmly on the road. Will was grateful, because if he was looking he would have seen the open, vulnerable feeling splashed across Will’s face. How long had it been since someone had shown honest concern for him, without agenda? How long had it been since any concern wasn’t tinged with bright flecks of pity? He felt safe in Hannibal’s presence, in a way he barely even felt in his own home, and it scared him.

“Has the hallucination abated?” It was only then that Will remembered the stag that had derailed him in the first place. He flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror, it was clear for the most part. The stag got smaller and smaller the further away they drove, in minutes it would be only a tiny black speck, then nothing at all.

“Almost, the stag hasn’t moved since I first saw it. It’s almost out of sight.”

“Your subconscious wants you to move past this incident, put physical distance between you and it.”

“I suppose. I haven’t been sleeping well, I’m afraid he’ll show up as soon as I close my eyes.” In every one of the more unethical sleep studies he’d read, people started hallucinating at 72 hours awake. Will was managing at most, four uninterrupted, fitful hours a night. It would catch up to him, and soon.

“That would be a legitimate explanation for the escalation of your visions. Are you still finding yourself wandering at night?”

“Sometimes, probably once or twice a week now. I lock all the doors every night and freeze the key in a shallow bowl. I’ve awoken a couple times holding the bowl, scratching at the surface of the ice, but it’s stopped me from going outside. Normally, in the mornings I heat the bowl in a pot of boiling water so I can go to work.” Saying it out loud, it sounded like the actions of an insane person. When he thought of it, he was actually proud of the solution he came up with, but now it just seemed desperate and sad. “I've sealed all the windows too, it wasn't enough to flip the latches.” He didn’t want to see Hannibal’s reaction, but he looked at his face anyway.

His eyebrows pinched slightly, there was mild concern and a hint of pride, but nothing else. No judgment, never judgment, not even clinical curiosity.

“Inventive solutions to a complicated problem.”

“That’s it? No carting me off to the nearest insane asylum?”

“You are not insane. You are a man with a very difficult job with an empathy disorder that makes it even more difficult. As a result, your body is manifesting symptoms, as unorthodox as they may be. Similar to how we may develop a fever when stressors are left unchecked.”

“I’ve tried to let go of my stressors, you know how well that went.”

“So we find alternate solutions, this is not a burden you have to bear alone.”

“You’re only saying that because Jack’s paying you to be my shrink.” He knew that wasn’t true, Hannibal had demonstrated over and over again that he was willing to go beyond what a normal psychiatrist would do, even if he was on Jack’s dollar.

“I’m saying this because you are my friend, Will. And Jack is not paying for our sessions, it would be rude to ask for payment to see a friend.” Will froze. How long had *that* been going on? Tension shot to his shoulders and leaked out just as suddenly, Hannibal really just cared for him, that’s all it was. As hard as it was to accept, Hannibal liked him and valued his presence in his life, it would be rude for Will to keep questioning that.

“I…” He trailed off, he didn’t know what to say, just that he had to say *something.* People didn’t go this far for him, not when he constantly was trying to shut them out at every opportunity. Hannibal deserved his effort, it was the least he could offer. “You’re my friend too.”

“I’m glad, but don’t strain yourself now. We are nearing your home and I think you should rest when we arrive.”

“What about Jack? I left without telling anyone, I’m surprised he hasn’t called yet.”

“I will handle Jack. I’ll let him know you suddenly fell ill and I happened to be near enough to drive you home. Your only responsibility at the moment is to recover, I will take care of everything else.”

“Geez Hannibal, I slipped off the road, I didn’t pass out or anything.”

“Your hands are still shaking, there’s blood on your chin and fingers, and every twenty seconds or so you check the rearview mirror. I don’t feel my concern is unwarranted.” He took a second to take stock of himself, he hadn’t even realized how bad he must’ve looked when Hannibal showed up.

He was so tired of acting crazy and talking about how crazy he was acting. Hannibal sighed and laid a gentle hand on Will’s arm, clenched hard in his lap, still trembling slightly. By the time they made it to Will’s little home, the limb had stopped shaking.

Will beelined for his pack before Hannibal had even turned his car off. Winston licked his hand where he bit it, the wound stung and he winced, but didn’t pull away. He breathed his pack's thick fur, their distinct scents flooded his nostrils and calmed his mind bit by bit.

Hannibal appeared at his side, coming from the direction of his bathroom. He hadn’t heard him pass but he had been a bit preoccupied. He bore a wettened washcloth and held out his hand, waiting for Will’s own. Extracting himself from the furry masses, Will attempted to take the washcloth, Hannibal clucked his tongue in admonishment and simply took the offending appendage. Will grimaced when he saw the slobber on his skin, but Hannibal didn’t seem to mind. He just cleaned the wound methodically; he didn’t even make Will explain its origin, he just dressed it and left for the kitchen.

His hand felt cold at the loss of his touch, he almost wished he’d bitten a little deeper so Hannibal would have had to spend a little longer touching him. How would it feel to have Hannibal stitch him up? He envisioned quick pinpricks of pain soothed by a steady, firm hand. A shiver trickled from his shoulders to his tailbone; he buried his face in his dog’s fur once more.

His ears began to ring again. Porter jumped into his lap even though he wasn’t supposed to, and honestly was far too big to fit. Will didn't attempt to dislodge him. The ringing stopped and Hannibal’s voice drifted in from the kitchen.

“This is Dr. Lecter speaking, Will is indisposed for the moment.” Oh, the ringing wasn’t in his head, Hannibal had answered his phone.

He could just barely make out Jack’s forceful timber, the words were indistinct though obviously not happy.

“He fell ill suddenly and I happened to be nearby. In an effort to conserve his privacy, I will say nothing further.” He ended the call with a quick sign off that Jack didn’t have time to protest. It was a bit rude, at least for Hannibal, but Will was pleased nonetheless.

He left Will to his own devices for the moment, from the sounds coming from his kitchen it appeared like he was making them an early supper, or perhaps a late lunch. Will wouldn't protest, he hadn't even finished the one gas station burrito he'd had that morning.

Cold air brushed past him as he opened the porch door to let the dogs out. He hovered in the entrance, not joining them as he normally would. His home wasn't lonely for the moment, he could hear Hannibal's movements in the other room, feel his presence filling the space of the home. It felt domestic, like this could've been a normal occurrence rather than him being coddled after a mental break. He could almost hear Abigail's voice, helping Hannibal in the kitchen, she was the only aspect missing from this fantasy.

Hannibal's smooth voice lifted him gently from his stupor, beckoning him to the kitchen. Winston dutifully followed him back inside while the rest of the pack snuffled around the yard and found roots to trip over.

He'd prepared a simple plate of sandwiches, well simple for him anyways. They were artfully drizzled in dressing, accompanied by fresh cucumber slices. From Hannibal's expression, he clearly didn't think it was enough. Will snorted.

"Barely a meal, isn't it?"

"No, no that's not it. Your face, you're clearly disappointed."

"Is it that obvious?"

"No, I doubt anyone else would have noticed but I'm starting to be able to read your tells. The corner of your mouth twitched."

"And that is all it took? You really are remarkable Will." Hannibal allowed fondness to grace his features, or maybe he just allowed Will to read him without his typical stoic mask. Heat climbed up his collar, he almost tugged on it before he remembered why he was wearing the stifling article in the first place.

He polished off the sandwiches quickly, wiping his mouth on cloth napkins Hannibal had somehow found and folded.

"I'll clean up, feel free to lie down for a while." Will *was* tired, he'd cycled through emotions like a roulette wheel today. His bed called to him like a siren song, but he didn't want the domestic bliss to end so soon.

"Are you sure you don't want my help?"

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't sure, and you need the rest." He turned that fond look to Will again and all he could do was acquiesce. The daydream had to come to an end, he shouldn't be dreading an empty home as much as he already was, Hannibal would be back tomorrow morning anyways. The sound of running water and dishes softly clinking in his sink lulled him into a gentle sleep, he didn't even notice when Hannibal departed.

His light sleep was interrupted by the faint squeak of his front door opening. He didn't have time to panic about an intruder before Hannibal crossed the threshold bearing a couple full paper bags.

"...Hannibal?"

"I'm sorry Will, I did not mean to wake you."

"No it's alright, I thought you left."

"Would you prefer that I did?" That was the last thing he wanted right now.

"No I…I'm glad you're here." In truth he'd been dreading waking up to an empty house.

He was still tired, but its root was more a deep seated exhaustion born of days without proper rest rather than the previous few hours' torment. Hannibal had apparently decided to stock Will's fridge and pantry, Will could hear him humming softly in between the crinkle of bags and shutting cupboard doors.

He padded softly into the kitchen and saw Hannibal tossing small bits of sausage to the dogs in between emptying his bags.

"I'm surprised you went grocery shopping, I thought you preferred to 'source by your own hand.'"

"I do. I realized in my haste I'd forgotten to lock my office and did not want to waste a trip. I'm afraid I was a tad overzealous in my preparations for my upcoming dinner party, so I have plenty to spare." He produced a few cuts of sealed meat from a small handheld cooler and placed them in Will's freezer.

"From your butcher again?"

"Entirely my own sources this time, after our conversation I found myself craving a respite from common society, so I indulged in a hunting trip."

"Must have been pretty successful if you have all this after supplying your feast."

"It was, maybe my most successful to date."

"You'll have to let me know when you go next, I think I'd like to join you." The image of him and Hannibal silently stalking prey manifested once again, there was something so satisfyingly primal about it.

"I will, though it will likely be many months until I plan something again, my freezer is quite full at the moment."

"Anything I'll need to brush up on in the meantime? Maybe target practice?"

"Perhaps your knifework, big game can be a tad more tricky to gut than your catches, though I believe you'd be a natural." Pride showed in the tiny shift of Hannibal's eyes, Will felt his

cheeks redden. The two of them finished putting away the groceries and Will found himself at a bit of a standstill. He still craved Hannibal's presence, but was running out of reasons to keep him here, though Hannibal didn't make a move to leave either. In the time Will was asleep, the sky had begun to darken into an amber hue. If Hannibal wanted to make it home before nightfall, he should leave now.

"Would you mind showing me your lure collection? I glanced at them when I was here last but did not stay long enough to see them in detail." Will smiled and led him to his little station, grateful that he didn't have to come up with an excuse.

Chapter End Notes

30k deep and wills like 'yeah were probably friends' rly livin up to the slowburn

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That evening he'd caught himself in a genuine smile more times than he cared to admit. Will's suffering was beautiful, but this desperate affection? It was a sight to behold. Despite his worsening encephalitis, this was the most at-ease he'd ever seen him.

This veneer of domesticity was not something he'd anticipated craving. He found himself reluctant to leave, multiple times that night he'd had the intention of forsaking Will to his burning brain only to find some further reason to keep himself in the man's presence. Will's home was far from the meticulously organized aesthetic of his own, but it had a certain rustic charm that he likely would have found distasteful if it was owned by anyone else.

Hannibal hadn't realized it in his last visit, but with Will's presence now occupying, it was obvious- typically Will was deeply uncomfortable with his living space, even though it provided him much more security than anywhere else. This stemmed from a deep-seated loneliness that he couldn't shut out with dogs and sealed off rooms. What was interesting was the expression he wore throughout most of Hannibal's visit– a surprised affection. He wasn't used to his home feeling full, Hannibal couldn't fault him though, it was a heady feeling, that potential for understanding.

Hannibal found himself once again in Will's kitchen, it was woefully lacking in amenities, but it was clean, though that was likely attributed to disuse. He seemed to use it more to make food for his dogs rather than himself. Another thing Hannibal couldn't fault him for, it made Will all the more appreciative of his own cooking, though he wished gas station burritos weren't such a staple of the man's diet.

He grabbed some of the herbs he picked from his own greenery wall and the cut he'd taken from the thigh of a particularly ornery tailor. A pleased smile twitched on his face at the thought that Will had likely seen what became of the rest of him just a few hours ago. Maybe one day Will would be ready to join in on his little joke.

The man in question was currently reading in the living room, Blake if his eyesight could be trusted. He was positioned so he could see Hannibal bustling around his small kitchen, every few minutes Hannibal could feel his gaze fall on him, like he was reassuring himself he was still there.

The next time he felt that gaze he made sure to catch Will's eyes just to see his reaction. He expected a nervous duck of his head but instead his expression turned soft and he closed the book he was barely reading and made his way to join him in the kitchen. Silently, Hannibal pushed a cutting board topped with carrots and bell peppers in Will's direction, which he took without hesitation. He took a second to admire his knifework, imagining the red pepper to be a beating, bleeding heart. Soon enough he would bring Will's potential into reality, but for the moment he could confidently say he was satisfied.

Their meal passed easily- a glorified stir fry that made him feel better about their lackluster lunch. Will maintained heavy eye contact as their combined work passed his lips. Hannibal knew undisguised hunger was showing through his veil, but Will just matched him steadily, his ritual not only accepted but encouraged. He didn't seem to mind Hannibal's oral fixation, an attractive smirk settled on the next bite.

It was well past ten when they finished and tidied the space. Will took his pack out once more and Hannibal greeted him at the door with glasses of his home-brewed whiskey. If he added a sleeping aid to Will's it was only for his own good, he needed the rest.

Hannibal's lips pressed into a thin satisfied line when he took a greedy swig as soon as the alcohol passed to his hand.

"It's late Hannibal, you should stay the night. There's no reason for you to drive two hours just to be back here in the morning."

"I'm afraid I'd forgotten to consider the commute, I may take you up on that." In truth he'd been eyeing Will's couch ever since he realized he'd be staying for dinner. He was pleased that Will offered, it would have been rude if he were to invite himself to stay over.

"I have a room upstairs, if you give me a few minutes to make it up." *And reopen the second story* went unsaid.

"Nonsense, your couch is perfectly serviceable." It wasn't his Californian king-sized mattress with silken sheets, but opposed to popular opinion, Hannibal wasn't a slave to luxury. He was an adaptable man, he had to be to have lived freely as long as he had.

Will looked like he was about to protest, perhaps to offer his own bed, but reconsidered when he remembered the sweaty sheets.

"Alright, let me at least find some spare bedding." Hannibal watched his eyes droop for a second before he righted himself and stalked off to another room. The fentanyl seemed to be taking effect. Will produced clean blankets and pillows that smelt of cheap laundry detergent and some sleep clothes that looked a bit too big for him. It was cold, the winter wasn't mild this year, but the only bedding on Will's own mattress was a thin sheet and a towel, his night fevers must be worsening.

Hannibal was eager to watch.

By the time Will had finished fussing with the couch, he downed the half glass of scotch and was clearly struggling to keep his eyes open.

"You can turn in, I can handle myself here."

"I-" Will interrupted himself with a yawn. "Alright, I will. The bathroom's down the hall." He hesitated for a moment before he turned back around, his expression tinged with meek vulnerability. "I don't want to lock you in but…"

“I understand, I'll wake you if you start wandering. It won't be a problem, I'm a light sleeper.”

“Thank you,” Relief buried his embarrassment. “Goodnight Hannibal.”

“Goodnight Will.” He made all the motions of preparing for sleep, but he didn’t close his eyes. There were no doors separating Will and him, though the living room with the couch sat in a different area than the back corner Will had shoved his bed into. The dogs settled in their various spots and quickly the even sounds of Will’s sleep breath tickled Hannibal’s ears.

He silently rose from his makeshift bed and began his trek around Will’s home. His first stop was the other occupant’s bedside, he stood there a few minutes, just watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. The only source of light was the moon's silver rays which barely shone through the closed curtains. He opened the curtain over Will’s head a tad further, his hair looked soft, curling around his face in a perfect halo. His breathing was steady and his eyes didn’t move under his lids, his sleep blissfully dreamless for the moment.

Hannibal brushed a finger along the side of his face, from the jut of his brow bone down to his jaw, Will didn’t so much as twitch. He was wearing another one of those thin turtleneck shirts he’d taken to recently, he’d sweat through it before dawn broke.

Hannibal hooked his pointer finger into the sleeping man’s collar and pulled the stretchy material down. With the light of the moon he could see the black prongs that grazed his collarbones and ended partway up his neck, caressing the jugular veins. He swallowed, overcome in a rare moment of unfiltered emotion. He’d known that his mark matched Will’s, he’d suspected since its first appearance and had known when the image was visible, the change in Will’s wardrobe cemented the idea.

Seeing it in front of him however, left him breathless.

He committed the picture in front of him to memory, he would have to draw it later, though it was unfortunate that he’d have to settle for artistic improvisation for the rest of the mark that remained hidden under Will’s clothing. He could reference his own, but Hannibal was a tad broader than Will’s starved form, it wouldn’t hug the same planes of sinew.

Will didn’t stir, he wouldn’t for hours as his system slowly worked through the drug that laced his veins. Winston laid at the foot of his bed and eyed Hannibal suspiciously- that dog was a sharp one. He left the animal and unconscious man after claiming one final glance at his sleeping form, he really was a rare beauty.

He pondered his next actions for a moment. Alongside the meat in his freezer, Hannibal had been planning on adding more of his own embellishments to Will’s lures, possibly planting more damning evidence in the barn on the edge of his property, but he was met with unexpected hesitation. He hadn’t been lying when he said he wanted Will to hunt with him, he’d need to be a free man for that. Though, to be honest the idea seemed too beautiful to exist in reality. He’d glimpsed the violence behind Will’s eyes on occasion, but it would be a difficult thing to craft, especially when Will was so perceptive to normal means of manipulation.

Decisions, decisions. What he knew for certain now was that he didn't want Will dead, he may even have a hard time killing him if it became a necessity. He could still do it, he reasoned, but it would take a toll that he was not willing to pay if it was possible to avoid. Will had become something…precious to him, more so than every other blooming killer he'd nurtured. With all of his power, he would help Will hatch from common decency's hard shell and bloom into the beast that crawled just beneath his skin. Even if he had to burn him alive to do it.

Will would hurt during the process, no creature shed their egg tooth without a little blood. He would be violent too, and would likely turn his righteous fury towards Hannibal; he could only hope that by that time, they would be so intrinsically intertwined that Will wouldn't be able to pull away, even when Hannibal's monster showed itself in the daylight. Fate was on Hannibal's side though, she'd already decided them to be predestined.

He shivered as he pictured it. Would Will come at him with a gun to his head? Attempt to put him down like a lame dog like he had Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Or had Hannibal earned the right for something more personal, perhaps a long hunting knife. Something intimate and familiar that he could slash into warm innards with. Lay him out and cut him open like sweet Abigail had done with Nicolas Boyle. Will wouldn't have that stricken look on his face, he would be present to experience every horrifying second.

The tiny remnants of his last batch of kills stayed in his bag. He still had time to persuade Will to a different path, and the man did not seem keen on allowing himself to realize the truth of Hannibal's nature. There were other players he could still involve if he needed a scapegoat, loathe as he was to allow his work to be attributed to a man undeserving. And he still had designs for his other blooming protege.

Their visit to Abigail last week had been cut short. Hannibal had picked Will up on a rare slow day at Quantico, Jack had been away on business. It was Will's first in over a month, Abigail had been ecstatic, in her own reserved way. She wanted out of her hospital room, out of the institution. It made her feel weak and fragile, she said as much, and their presence brought a sort of excitement that she didn't get from Alana's visits.

Alana had been the cause of their short stay; she arrived less than a half hour after them and took Will from the room with a deceptively soft smile and 'reminded' him that Abigail was still in a fragile state, that she wasn't ready for Will's presence as a constant reminder of her father. She also implied that they should both quit pursuing guardianship, that it would be better for her health if they let her go.

It was enraging. Hannibal respected her tenacity and dedication to Abigail, but still allowed himself to craft multiple recipes for her healthy organs. By the time she was through, Will was thoroughly chastised- he hadn't even worked up the nerve to present Abigail with the gift he brought.

As infuriating as the whole situation was, it worked towards his favor in the end: it distanced Will from Alana, he would naturally seek Hannibal's reassurance as he still cared deeply for Abigail. It also served to make Will's and Hannibal's presence even more tantalizing; Alana clearly didn't know the desires of adolescents as well as she claimed if this was her strategy of distancing them. Teenagers always wanted what they weren't supposed to have, and at the

moment what Abigail wanted more than anything was support from people who wouldn't treat her like a broken, delicate thing, who wouldn't dance around the violence she'd grown used to her entire life.

As soon as she was released into his care, Hannibal would help her mold herself into the wicked blade she was meant to be. Her past would become a source of strength, a deep well to draw inspiration from. He wouldn't even have to wind her up to watch her go.

Will would see her elation, see how it reflected his own, see how she didn't shamefully hide it away. With all his paternal affection, he couldn't deny her and the man that gave her the tools to hone herself.

Will wanted a family. Hannibal would give him a family, served up on a silver platter with lamb and pomegranate. He was a good chef, the feast would be irresistible, especially to a man that had been fed with only loneliness for nearly two decades.

Hannibal returned to Will's couch, the warmth from the fire was slowly dwindling. He added another log and stoked the flames- he avoided the cold whenever possible. For the night, he would not enact any more plans, though he wouldn't remove the meat from Will's freezer. As much as the cuts could damn him, they were also a gift, and it was a heady pleasure to fill Will's belly with his offerings.

He closed his eyes and slept, still and dreamless.

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Will woke the next morning to the smell of cooking meat wafting in from his kitchen. He'd sweat in the night, but not even enough to fully soak his shirt, the towel under him had stayed dry. Surprisingly, he'd stayed in bed and he didn't remember having a single dream. His head was a bit foggy, but this was the least disoriented he'd felt upon waking in weeks.

He showered and dressed before he made his way to the kitchen, Hannibal had already donned his suit, though he was once again missing his vest and overcoat.

"You already prepared the last two meals we had, contrary to what you might think I'm not entirely unable to fend for myself." There was no bite in his words. He sidled up to the man occupying his kitchen as he teased.

"Cooking is one of my great pleasures, you wouldn't deny me the opportunity, would you?"

"I'd never dream of it, though I doubt anyone would once they tasted one of your meals." He had the urge to touch Hannibal, to slide an arm around his back as he flipped the crisping bacon.

"It is always my goal to satisfy every palette I come across, so I'm glad you seem so appeased. How are you feeling this morning?"

"A little groggy, but better than usual, much better than yesterday. I woke up in my own bed, so I guess I didn't wander off?"

“No, you didn’t. I awoke a couple times to the sounds outside your home, but never to your movement. I glanced in your direction and you were always sleeping in the same position I saw you last.”

“I’m sorry that you woke up, some of the forest animals can get pretty active at night.”

“It was not a problem, I’m used to it and I don’t require much sleep.”

“I haven’t made it through a whole night in weeks, maybe months. Maybe you should stay over more often,” He joked, or at least pretended he was joking. He’d fallen asleep almost immediately, soothed with the smooth whiskey and comforted by the knowledge Hannibal was just a room over. The only flaw, which he would only admit with his dying breath, was that he hadn’t been able to see Hannibal from his bed; despite having never truly desired to share his bed with another person, he wanted Hannibal in his. He blushed at his own wording, though he *had* meant it literally.

“Maybe I will, I enjoy your home Will. Though if I come again, I will insist on bringing my own coffee.”

“Doesn’t this go against doctor-patient propriety?”

“Lucky for us, you are not my patient. Though I would also offer my own home next time.” *Next time,* like these domestic nights would be a regular occurrence. There was some implication there, one that sent heat to his cheeks and his stomach doing a floor routine.

“Next time I have a psychotic break?”

“Next time that you desire to sleep in my company, I don’t need a pretense to spend time with you, Will. I’m very fond of you.” Hannibal turned from the stove to catch his gaze, Will could feel his sincerity, it washed over his skin like a wave of cool water.

“I’ll…keep that in mind.” His words petered out, he had to avert his eyes from the weighted gaze, though it wasn’t discomfort that made him look away. It was excitement, a bouncing hopeful feeling that made him oh-so guilty. Will’s lonely heart ached to share his living space with another person and Hannibal wasn’t offering every night, Will felt ridiculous for even wanting it.

The doctor turned back to the stove and finished the eggs he was scrambling, plating them and the bacon. He topped the meal with sprigs of herbs, homemade honey biscuits, and a light purplish pink juice with little dark seeds floating at the bottom. It was all delicious of course, the dogs certainly agreed as Hannibal fed them little bits of the excess meat.

“When’s your first appointment?”

“Not for a few hours, though we should start our trek sooner than later. I’d hate to keep you from your classes.”

“Alana’s covering them this week, I asked her to when the second body dropped. Knew Jack would keep me busy.”

“I can imagine you would be. How high was the final body count?”

“Five, four of them were the ripper’s though Zeller was convinced that first one was one of his too. The four that *were* his, he killed in only three days. Honestly, the most impressive thing about it is his time management, he’s certainly very thorough when he cleans his compositions.”

“Compositions? Are you implying that he’s a musician?”

“Virtuoso, artist, inventor- he’s chosen a medium and mastered it. Every scene of his is so… picturesque, he thinks they’re beautiful. I can’t say I entirely disagree.”

“This isn’t the first killer you’ve called an artist.”

“I actually have a theory about that, but I can’t really take it to Jack at the moment. It’s just a feeling.”

“Our gut feelings often stem from our subconscious recognizing patterns too minuscule for our forebrain, and your senses are particularly keen. What is this ‘feeling’?”

“I think the copycat killer and the ripper are the same person. There’s the same sadism, the same mutilation, the same artistic display. The big one though, is the removal of organs. I should have seen it in the copycat immediately, I’ve been covering the ripper in my classes for years, whatever he’s doing with the organs is as important as the act of killing itself, I should have known when we weren’t able to find Boyle’s lungs.”

“So finding them, or what he does with them, is the surest way to find the man himself?”

“Exactly. It’s how I knew Gideon wasn’t the ripper- he didn’t take a single organ. If the ripper really had been locked up for so long he wouldn’t have been able to resist.”

“Your theory certainly holds merit, would it help the investigation much?”

“Not really, even if it is true. All we would have are more kills attributed to him, but that’s not really useful unless we found tangible evidence. Nicolas Boyle didn’t kill those girls and he’s certainly not the ripper, so we’re back to square one. The location doesn’t really help either, we already know that he has the means to travel wherever inspiration strikes him.”

“An elusive man, though I have every confidence you will find him soon enough.”

“Jack certainly thinks so. I’ll keep looking for him and looking at all the pieces he paints, but honestly I doubt we’re going to get much closer, at least not without some sort of drastic shift.” Will got the feeling that whatever happened, he’d be at the center of it. A logical guess, if probably a bit obvious if the mark on his chest was anything to go by.

“I doubt it will be, but for both yours and Jack’s sakes, I hope the shift is by the FBI's doing and not his.” Will nodded along. He was sure that Hannibal hadn’t meant for the platitude to ring hollow, but it did and Will couldn’t blame him. The ripper was the one in control, he’d been stringing the FBI along for years, that likely wouldn’t change now.

Hannibal gathered their dishes when they finished and Will helped him at the sink. Their elbows and feet grazed in the cramped space, Will made sure to brush against him as much as was strictly polite. He couldn't be certain, but he got the feeling that Hannibal did the same.

Will fed his pack and gave them quick pets and kisses before joining Hannibal in his Bentley. He'd left almost everything in his office in his rush to leave, so all he had to gather was his phone and a winter coat.

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He could feel himself slipping again but the transition was so sweet and slow that he hadn't realized how far down he'd gone.

It started with Abigail's voice, she whispered reassurances while he continued to stare at the photos all laid out on his desk. He'd see Hannibal in a couple hours and he wanted to have some sort of new theory they could discuss, but he had nothing. The ripper was still a blank slate, an impenetrable wall, his only insights were still just what the ripper wanted him to see.

Abigail told him to sit down, he did, her responding smile warmed the cold lecture hall. She lit a match and set the crime photos aflame, heating her hands in the fire. The academy halls melted away, exposing a summer night. She called him *dad* and time outside this moment ceased to exist.

The hallucination didn't abate until Hannibal's voice tugged him from his stupor. At first he hadn't realized the sound was coming from outside the reality he'd formed, he'd been so happy for a brief moment that Hannibal was going to join them at the campfire.

It was nearing 9:00 pm, his appointment was an hour and a half ago. He'd been at his desk hallucinating for almost four hours. He hoped that after Hannibal's stay in his home a couple nights ago, their next interaction wouldn't have him behaving quite so erratic. Apparently that was a hollow dream to chase.

Will hadn't even fully reinstated himself in reality when Jack barged in.

"Do you want to help us catch the ripper?" It was as irrefutable as it was ridiculous. Whoever Jack thought he found, they wouldn't be the ripper, he was too good for that.

"How could I refuse?" If anyone could refuse Jack, it would be Hannibal, but the lure of catching the most notorious at-large serial killer was an attractive one, especially to a psychiatrist. Will wanted Hannibal as far away from this as possible, he wasn't a cop. He was an untrained civilian that Jack should be shamed for trying to rope in.

A hasty flurry of activity followed, as soon as they reached their first stop Will knew the ripper was so far out of their reach he might as well be sleeping on a cloud. He wouldn't have used something as obvious as an ambulance and he wouldn't be moonlighting as a medical student, this was their organ harvester, and he'd have absolutely no connection to the ripper.

Other than his disappointment and ire towards Jack, Will felt an anticipatory thrill. Logically, he knew Hannibal shouldn't be here, but he couldn't help the sense of…rightness he felt with Hannibal joining him in this pursuit. He stayed glued to Will's side the whole time, his eyes never showed any fear or hesitation, only resolve and a steadfast confidence in Will. It was far from his feral fantasy of them pursuing prey through the underbrush, but it was strangely comparable, as much as decent society would allow.

They finally had a name for the man who made the scene in the hotel bathtub- Devon Sylvestri. It wouldn't be long now before they caught up to him.

Will hadn't brought his gun, so he was left to linger behind the rest of the team with Hannibal. He seemed a little disappointed, Will could understand the sentiment, though he would have thought the team unprofessional if they allowed two unarmed men to join the charge. Jack's call brought action back though.

"Dr. Lecter!" His voice was stern but Will detected traces of unsettlement. There must be a body in the ambulance along with Sylvestri. "I need you to assess the situation."

Hannibal readily hopped in the car, taking his place right next to the killer. Nervousness shot through Will's spine.

"He was removing this man's kidney, poorly. I can stop the bleeding."

"Do it." Jack funneled Sylvestri outside the ambulance, leaving Hannibal to the unwilling donor. Red blood seeped onto his glove, Will could see the live viscera through Hannibal's eyes. There was no hesitation or apprehension, his experience was tangible.

Will hadn't recognized the emotion he'd been feeling for days, maybe weeks, until just now, with Hannibal's hand deep inside an unconscious man, holding onto his life with his easy confidence. Will hadn't recognized it because he'd never felt it before, at least not to this extent. He *wanted* Hannibal desperately, in every selfish way it implied. There was something like grace with which he held the man's life, the same way he'd held Abigail's together, that was so alluring, and he was born to wear that perfect shade of maroon.

His forearms were bare, same as when he cooked, he was utterly enchanting. Every twitch of muscle seen in beautiful detail. He found the outside world melting around him once again, time slipping away like sand through a sieve.

Would he still accept Will's selfishness when it was directed towards him? He caught Will's eyes, only the two of them were left looking at each other as Jack and the first contact team rushed to apprehend the medical student. There was that professional mask again, the same one he wore when he held Abigail's throat, but a subtle spark showed through as he kept Will's gaze. Curiosity? Interest? Maybe hunger, if Will could forgive himself for projecting.

He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. Tongued the wound as he watched his friend continue to reach inside the man.

Irrational anger boiled up in him, from multiple sources with no outlet to release it. He hadn't been touched by another human since Hannibal brushed him in his kitchen, and before that it had been weeks. Any type of real physical intimacy was a forgotten dream at this point, he didn't even know if could bear it now, but he *craved* it. He wanted Hannibal holding *his* organs in place, to hold *him* together, his sure hands coated in *his* blood. He wanted to strap the man down to a gurney and carve his wicked soulmark into his chest, the heady rush at the thought nearly made him throw up.

Hannibal wasn't for him, he couldn't be, not with his class and charm and confidence. But the idea that Will could make him be? Even in a fantasy it shot a dark pleasure down Will's spine. In his delusion, the ripper would feel every cut too and know that Will had torn him from his chest and replaced him wholly, he would *suffer* in the way Will had ever since he realized who his mark represented.

"Will?" His eyes snapped to Hannibal's lips as they formed his name. "Will, you're bleeding."

A trickle of pink-tinted spit had left the corner of his mouth. "Ah, sorry, I must have bit my tongue. I'm…gonna go check on Jack." He left Hannibal to deal with the unwilling donor and walked out of sight of everyone present. These violent fantasies were getting worse and now they were involving the one man he could confidently say was his friend. He had to calm down before he said something, or worse *did* something.

Jack and Beverly made quick work of Sylvestri. He admitted to all of his crimes on the spot, though Jack was clearly irritated that he hadn't claimed more of the bodies they'd found. He'd only have one real murder charge, debatable whether it'd be first or second degree, though considering the student's unsteady hand, there might have been a few of his victims who died from sloppy medical complications after they walked away from his procedure.

Jack asked him if he knew the ripper, if he was working with him. He wasn't, Jack probably didn't even need Will there to see the truth in his eyes.

The paramedics arrived shortly, funnily enough they just used Sylvestri's kill truck to transport the man with his barely-attached kidney and the EMT that relieved Hannibal from his duty. There were a few specks of blood high on his wrist where the glove didn't cover, Will tried and failed not to stare at them. His brain buzzed with unused adrenaline, he wanted to lick Hannibal's wrist. He wanted to take Beverly's gun and shoot himself in the foot for thinking that. His hand pressed into the meat of his bad shoulder, the pain didn't really ground him, but it was close enough.

He did his best not to speak to anyone on their way back to Quantico, Hannibal didn't try to make him. His heavy hand fell on Will's bicep whenever he drifted too far off, it was distracting but that's what kept him present.

When he finally made the trek back to Wolf Trap, his car never made it above forty miles-per-hour.

Chapter End Notes

what if i made will a lil batshit. as a treat

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will ran his hand through his hair, tugging at a few loose curls. His ‘date’ with the ripper was largely unenlightening. He’d been pulling fourteen hour days before they’d apprehended Sylvestri, but with their one lead a complete dead end, the entire team had been pushing even farther to find *something*.

If he was being entirely honest, it all felt rather pointless. He’d memorized every angle of the last four bodies, poured over previous scenes, connected them with strings and newspaper articles. No revelations came, it was as if smoke, not a man killed these people. He had all this pent up energy that normally resulted in quick leaps of logic that was just left festering, he had a headache. Though that might also be attributed to his rumbling stomach. The only thing he’d consumed in the last eight hours had been shitty cafeteria coffee.

It was nearing ten when his phone rang, it startled him.

“Hello, Graham speaking.”

“Good evening Will, I hope I haven’t woken you?” Hannibal’s voice was a balm on his aching nerves.

“No, I’m still at Quantico. Doubt I’ll be sleeping any time soon, not when I still can’t see anything from the ripper. It’ll keep me awake.”

“Your ‘date’ stood you up?”

“Oh he’s here, in every scene I’m looking at. He basically signs them. But he knows his trail is perfectly covered, no yellow brick roads to follow tonight.”

“And I’m sure there will be plenty of nights in the future where you can attempt to get to Emerald City. Have you eaten?”

“Not recently, though I’m hoping a gas station might be open when I decide to leave.” Hannibal didn’t make a sound, but Will could almost feel his face twist in displeasure.

“I find myself with an excess of leftovers from tonight’s feast. My guests have all left for the night and I promise it will be more satisfying than whatever you might find in a gas station.”

“I still doubt I’d be good company, are you sure?”

“As I said last time, I would not offer if I wasn’t sure. And I sorely missed your presence at my table.” Maybe it was time to call it quits for the moment. His neighbor had already fed the pack and taken them out, it's not like he would lose more sleep if he spent an hour or two at Hannibal’s.

“Alright, I’m not making much progress here anyways. I can be there in 45 minutes?”

“I’ll meet you at the door, until then Will.”

“See you soon.” His phone screen returned to black, he caught the tailend of a half-smile on his own lips in the reflective screen.

He parked in Hannibal’s driveway rather than the alley behind he’d taken to for their sessions. There was no pretense for their dinner, no veneer they were clinging onto. They simply enjoyed each other's presence, Hannibal was his friend and he desired his company. Will couldn’t remember the last time a relationship had been so simple, everybody seemed to want something from him, or they felt like they were doing their good deed for the day by spending time with poor, lonely, broken Will Graham.

It was strange that an uncomplicated friendship first came from the man that was introduced to him to be his therapist. Which is why Will needed to get a handle on the very complicated feelings he was experiencing.

His…infatuation with Hannibal was not sustainable, he was far too perceptive. He’d see through Will’s pathetic poker face soon if he hadn’t already, so he had to find a way to nip his feelings in the bud and pull out the roots. Somehow.

Hannibal’s door swung open before he could knock. Will was starting to realize that the smell of fresh food was a near-constant in the doctor’s home.

“Come in, I’ve just about finished with your plate.”

“You said you were just trying to get rid of leftovers, it couldn’t take long to throw them in the microwave,” Will teased as Hannibal took his coat. He looked playfully affronted and responded with a grimace that didn’t overshadow the mirth in his eyes.

“I do not use my microwave for food, and I’m a little insulted that you believed I might.”

“Sorry I implied there might be anything typical about your kitchen, I should have known better.”

Hannibal graced him with his low chuckle and led the way. There was a beautiful spread of dishes that didn’t look picked apart at all.

“...Did you even have leftovers? I bet your guests polished everything off and asked for seconds.”

“You caught me, but as I said, I enjoy cooking for you. I feared you’d try to save me the trouble if I mentioned I desired to prepare you a meal that I would not be partaking in.”

“You’re probably right, but next time just ask me to come over. You know I enjoy your company too.”

“Next time then.”

Hannibal’s offerings looked even better on an empty stomach. There was meat in every dish and it all looked mouth-wateringly savory, he wouldn’t be able to finish everything, but perhaps Hannibal might allow him to take some for the road. Will’s fridge was starting to become full for the first time in months, if not years, all thanks to the unwarranted amount of food that Hannibal seemed to want to unload on him.

As was rapidly becoming a habit, he looked Hannibal squarely in the eye as the first bite passed his lips.

His passive mask was so thin tonight, Will detected satisfaction, desire, smug confidence, and something a little hungrier as he tracked the bob of Will’s Adam’s apple. His resolve cracked and splintered in its wake, he nearly dropped his fork. He forced another bite and Hannibal seemed pleased, he turned to continue restoring his workspace to its original pristine state.

This was different from Will’s last experience dining here. There was an anticipatory zing in the air, a tension that wasn't so much awkward as it was teasing. Despite his gifts of insight, he'd never been much good at reading a room.

“How was your dinner party?” He cringed a little at the forced casualty of his tone.

“It went well. I could tell you the dramatics that passed but it seems a bit gauche, you wouldn't know any of the participants after all.”

“‘Dramatics’? Well now you’ve got me curious.”

“It's all rather banal compared to your every day, lots of pointed jabs presented as compliments and fruitless attempts to one-up each other. Baltimore’s socialites are a catty lot I’m afraid.”

“Then I doubt my presence would have been appreciated anyway, the vultures would have sensed someone outside their kind.”

“On the contrary, I think you would have flourished. You’re not a delicate wilting flower, Will. You would have picked at each of their seams as soon as they singled you out and the whole lot would unravel at your feet. I found myself picturing it the whole night.” Will ducked his head back to his plate, cheeks burning.

“You don’t seem very fond of the people you just allowed into your home and table.”

“Most of them are exceedingly shallow creatures, yes.”

“So why do you bother?”

“Why indeed.” Hannibal brandished a challenging smirk, daring Will to piece together his actions. He glanced towards the dining room and let the pendulum swing once, twice, three times.

The kitchen filled with dishes and hired help, excited mumbling could be heard from the adjoining room. His hands moved quickly with practiced ease- here in the kitchen he is comfortable, but the real fun begins when the meal is served. He, not any of the hired chefs, would present the first course, as he would every course that followed. Each time he was met with admiration and praise, but it's hollow coming from the people at the table. He didn't respect them as they respected him.

Throughout the night, with each course presented and each glass of wine refilled, the veneer of the gracious host became thinner and thinner, his disdain and scathing remarks became less and less shielded. Still, not a single person saw him as anything but that gracious host. They continued to laugh at his jokes and praise his cooking, it all passed their lips without realizing that the man at the head of the table would not attend a single one of their funerals.

For once, Will returned to reality without a heavy panic settling in his chest. Instead he just felt amused, he almost snorted.

"It makes you feel powerful, it's cruel entertainment but only if you're in on the joke, and no one ever is."

"You could have been. I'll admit it's quite humorous to watch them squabble and preen."

"You don't let them see your kitchen, 'behind the scenes'. It's an impersonal performance. You keep your sleeves rolled down and waistcoat on and still they trick themselves into thinking they know you; you tease them with your cooking, the most personal part of you, and they still don't *see* anything. It's exactly the opposite from when you cook for me." Hannibal froze where he was replacing a knife in its block, his eyes gleamed as Will finished his analysis. He couldn't look away even if he wanted to.

"You really are brilliant, Will. As much as I would have adored your company earlier, I think I prefer this. I would not have you diluted by all the trite conversation. You're the only one tonight that deserves to have a meal made without contempt."

"It still seems like a lot of effort for people you don't even like, even if it is slightly entertaining."

"I'm used to my creations ending up in the hands of the undeserving, if I didn't find humor in it I would have gone mad years ago." Will had no idea what 'creations' he was talking about, but this was clearly an old problem he'd had to resolve. And if he was being entirely honest, the whole situation was distinctly appealing. Hannibal had a cruel side to him that Will hadn't experienced before, it was enchanting. It brought him off the pedestal Will had placed him on, humanized him, which made Will's resolve to break his infatuation shudder and crack.

He finished his dinner just as Hannibal fished out his reserve of scotch and poured two liberal glasses.

"When you are done, I would greatly appreciate it if you joined me in the study." With that he left Will to his own devices. It wasn't long though, he joined him as soon as his dirty dish was taken care of.

Hannibal sat on a couch in front of the hearth with a small coffee table placed in between. There sat their twin glass tumblers, flanking the parent bottle. Two leather seats bordered, but the couch was a suggestion, one that Will didn't fail to see. Hannibal's overcoat was missing and his forearms were bare, he wasn't pressed into the arm of the seat either, it was his subtle way to offer intimacy. Will couldn't refuse, wouldn't dream of it. He took his place at Hannibal's side, just enough space between them to stay polite, he didn't miss the small smile Hannibal attempted to hide with his glass. When he set it down it was slightly closer to Will's.

That string of tension from before was back with a vengeance, thick enough to saw with a serrated knife.

"Thanks for calling me tonight," He said just to attempt to tear the strand, though it was largely unsuccessful. "If you hadn't I'd probably been there till morning."

"As much as I'd like to take credit for giving you your needed respite, my reasons for calling were entirely selfish." Will downed the rest of his glass, the whiskey burned. Hannibal didn't fault him for not savoring it, he just gently took the tumbler from Will's hand, allowing their fingers to brush in the process.

He shifted in his seat to pour another liberal glass and breached the minimal space between their legs, they brushed slightly now. He didn't move away after he finished fixing the drink.

"And what were those reasons?" Will's voice was breathless, he watched Hannibal's tongue chase an amber drop on his thin upper lip.

"You already know my motivations, Will. I'm far more curious about yours for lingering."

"Would you like me to leave?" He made no move to stand.

"If I had my way, you never would." Will's teeth clenched hard at his lower lip, Hannibal's eyes dilated as he watched with rapt attention.

"Careful doctor, some heavy implications there."

"None that I wouldn't be willing to take responsibility for." Their thighs had shifted at some point so they pressed close together, elbows brushed with every sip of scotch. Will felt every point of contact, it burned.

Hannibal set his glass down and his fingertips rested on Will's knee. The naked half lidded expression he wore- one of hunger, desire, understanding, and a zing of *lust*- snapped Will's control like a rubber band. He carelessly discarded his own glass before crowding in on the other man.

He cupped the sharp line of Hannibal's jaw a scant instant before their lips connected. He'd forgotten to tilt his head, but Hannibal compensated. The hand that hadn't slid down to hold the back of the good doctor's neck splayed on his chest. He pressed hard, imagining his fingers could brand his mark into the flesh underneath the pale blue shirt if he bore down with enough force.

Hannibal hauled him closer, one hand holding the side of his face firmly and the other on Will's last floating rib while he nipped at his kiss swollen lower lip. He swung his thigh around to straddle Hannibal's lap, knocking the coffee table in the process, he barely noticed.

Hannibal's mouth was hot and insistent, he parted his lips to allow Will's fervent exploration. He was probably clumsy with inexperience, it had been years since his last encounter and he'd never dabbled with men in the past, but Hannibal didn't seem bothered. In fact, if the low noises he was making could be trusted, Will's juvenile enthusiasm excited him. It had been so long since he'd felt this *hungry* for another person, and he knew that feeling wasn't entirely his own, he was caught in a feedback loop between the two of them.

Will bit down, hard. Hannibal groaned as the taste of coppery blood exploded on both their tongues. He withdrew for a second and Will was afraid that he'd crossed a line until Hannibal dove to attack his mouth in turn. His urgent explorations found the tender spot where Will had bitten his own cheek a few days ago, and teased until it released a sluggish stream to match the tear on Hannibal's lip. Saliva and blood trickled down the corner of their mouths in pink trails. Hannibal ducked to catch a drop as it dipped below Will's chin.

He followed his new path of exploration, sucking and biting the underside of Will's jaw. He'd have beard burn from Will's two-day-old stubble but he either didn't mind or didn't notice. Will couldn't help the whining groans that were pulled from him with every pass of Hannibal's teeth on the sensitive skin. It was so *warm* with Hannibal's burning mouth bearing down on his front while the fire licked his back. Without much thought, he swiftly discarded his flannel, not made easier by the fact that Hannibal refused to dislodge himself.

Will took the initiative to purple Hannibal's jaw with his own bites. Without any consideration for softness, he wrenched the man's head into position and dove into the heady scent of his aftershave. One of Hannibal's hands flew to the back of his head to draw him impossibly closer.

He dug his teeth into the apex of his jugular vein, right under the jaw bone where it's easiest to read his pulse. Hannibal let out a small shout and dug his hand into the meat of Will's good shoulder, wrenching his body to press hard, almost painfully, into his own. He could feel the steady beat of Hannibal's heart on his tongue where the clench of his teeth drew blood to the surface. He bit a little harder and *felt* the jump of his pulse at the threat.

It was beautiful. Maddening.

Their lips rejoined to savor the blood still lingering, before Hannibal ducked below once again. He trailed further down, his fingers dug hard into Will's hips as he mouthed his Adam's apple. The stretchy collar of Will's athletic shirt was tugged lower as he moved to taste the meat of Will's neck. He almost bared his throat like a submissive dog before he remembered why he had that infuriating turtleneck on in the first place.

With a gentle hand, he drew Hannibal's face back, he relented with a final suck and soft kiss to the reddened flesh. The moment of respite allowed him to really take stock of the man he was straddling. His hair was tousled, soft along his brow when it wasn't gelled back. A genuine look of reverence bloomed across his lidded eyes and bloodied lips. He was flecked

with various shades of red, pink, and maroon as blood smeared at every point Will's lips had touched.

In the low light of the fire, it almost looked like some of that dark color splattered into his thin iris, just barely bordering a blown-out pupil. Will's eyes fell to the mess he made of the man's neck. Defined tooth imprints could be made out on nearly every reddening mark, a strange mix of horror and pride stirred in his gut as he took them in.

He pressed lightly into one of the bruises, Hannibal shivered under his touch. Will felt his cock jump where it was trapped under his thighs. It was only then, as he continued to agitate the flesh, that he really noticed both their hard arousals. He rocked back experimentally and Hannibal let out a soft animalistic sound and snatched the hand currently bearing down on his neck.

A gentler look passed and he brought Will's wrist to his mouth, tasting the flesh with his tongue and strangely long canines. The vampire comparison Will made at their initial breakfast might be more apt than he thought.

He lavished attention to the appendage, slowly drawing the sleeve back and leaving a trail of suck bruises from the blue vein all the way to his inner elbow. Will watched with rapt fascination as tooth marks steadily crawled up his arm, they looked like animal tracks, like a bloodied rabbit's in fresh fallen snow. When he arrived at the thick tendon of Will's elbow, he dug his incisors and tongue in, relishing the taste of skin. The whole progression had been gentle, as gentle as he could be while using his teeth, loving if Will would let his desperation be voiced.

Hannibal drew their lips together again, this time a slow swirl mindful of the sealing cuts. Will cupped his cheek and rested their foreheads together when the need for air arose. This was as far as they would go tonight, he could sense it in the air, almost feel the satisfied purr in Hannibal's chest.

Will buried his face in the crook of Hannibal's neck, he lazily placed soft closed-mouth kisses just above the high collar of his dress shirt and simply basked in his comforting heat. He felt boneless, enough adrenaline and oxytocin in his brain to have driven out his ever-present headache. Hannibal ran a hand through his messy curls and rubbed little comforting circles into his hip.

It wasn't that the outside world and their actions' consequences had ceased to register to him, he'd simply wanted this more. For the moment though, he could discard his burning brain, Jack's demands, and the vile mark on his chest. Hannibal's attention and stability were too sweet, and now that he'd gotten a taste he wouldn't do without it. They would work something out, there was technically no moral problem as Will wasn't legally his patient, Jack would get over it eventually if this ever got back to him.

Hannibal likely didn't have a mark, or if he did it had faded years ago with a mate who passed, and Will would happily disregard his own for this man he'd come to cherish. He wouldn't be left unmoored, Hannibal would meet him with that steadfast resolve and they'd venture forward *together*.

“Will?” Hannibal’s voice came out raw, either from poorly-veiled emotion or physical strain. Will smiled against his neck.

“Yeah?”

“I think…” This was perhaps the first instance he’d heard the other man hesitate. “I think it’s about time we turn in.”

With a resigned sigh, he peeled himself from the broader man’s chest. He was rewarded with a chaste kiss for his efforts. He led Will by the hand to his guest bedroom, he was disappointed but it was probably for the best considering he still was reluctant to allow Hannibal to see his bare chest.

“The bathroom attached should be stocked with all the amenities you might need. If you give me a moment I’ll grab you some spare sleep clothes.” Will gave him a drowsy smile and hummed in acknowledgment. The room had deep blue walls and a matching bedspread that looked soft enough to sink into. The mattress formed around him when he sat down. There was a window, but the latch looked unfamiliar enough that he (probably) wouldn’t try to open it in the night.

Hannibal knocked on the door softly and pushed his way in, it hadn’t been fully closed.

“I will be just down the hall. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I do need something from you.”

“Oh?” Hannibal tilted his head slightly, just like Winston did, it was cute. “And what can I provide?”

“Come here.” He dutifully joined Will at the bedside, dropping the sleep clothes off on the dresser. Will looped his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders and brought their lips together once again. Their kisses were sweet and languid, their tongues dipping in and out with lazy insistence that was less fueled by heat and more by a promise of understanding.

“Goodnight Hannibal, I’ll see you in the morning.” It was Hannibal’s turn to pull back reluctantly.

“Goodnight Will.” With a final glance over his shoulder, he left Will to his rest, shutting the door with a soft click. The thin sweater, tee shirt, and pajama bottoms were even softer than the bedding, Will was asleep before he could even consider locking the door.

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He’d expected intimacy tonight, no more than occurred, but he’d anticipated this turn of events. What he hadn’t expected was Will’s savagery. It was rolling and blissfully scalding, like a spilled pot of boiling water, it bubbled and cracked and left him with burns that would take some considerable effort to hide. He could already see purple bruises lining his neck, he looked more like he got choked than kissed.

It was utterly enchanting. Hannibal thought Will might show more resistance to his less civilized desires, but it seemed that as soon as he could find some sort of loophole or allowance, he let them out in full force. It could be attributed partially to his encephalitis, but that deep-rooted desire didn't sprout from nowhere, his burning brain was just helping chip away at his inhibitions.

Though after tonight, Hannibal was less inclined to allow it to go untreated. He had plenty of means now to bind Will to his side, he'd hate for any permanent damage to happen to that beautiful, dangerous mind.

Soft thumps echoed from beyond his door- unsteady bare feet on the hallway carpet. He wondered if his guest had gotten up by his own volition or if Hannibal would get to experience his nighttime wanderings. Either way, he would join him.

No lights were on in the spare bedroom and Will was making his lurching way towards the stairs. He moved like a zombie, and sort of looked the part in an abstract way. His eyes were hollow, the moonlight paled his skin, and the bitemarks ringing his neck and arm could imply an infection sight. Though he was notably missing the rotting, grotesque aspect- he was beautiful as ever.

He didn't respond as Hannibal grasped his shoulder, he didn't expect him to anyways. His sleeping body moved willingly as Hannibal led him into the master bedroom and sat him on the bed. This was another outcome he'd thought to anticipate. From the side table he withdrew a full syringe, sterilized the needle, and dabbed a topical numbing agent to the entrance point. He found the spot he was looking for easily even in the low light.

It would be hard to disguise the tell-tale bruise of a shot come morning, but as he said, Hannibal had anticipated this. The purple suck mark on Will's inner elbow would be cover enough for the sleep aid he was re-introducing to his bloodstream. The numbing agent did its job, the sleepwalking man didn't so much as stir as Hannibal depressed the syringe.

His hollow eyes immediately began to droop. Hannibal laid him down gently and left to retrieve the sweater that remained on the guest bedroom dresser. He wouldn't let Will think he'd gotten a glimpse at his soulmark unwillingly, he wouldn't rob him the reveal.

With the thin sweater securely on, Hannibal joined him on the mattress. In his last shreds of conscious unconsciousness, Will pulled himself into Hannibal's chest and wrapped a loose arm around his middle. His eyes drifted shut and his breathing evened, Hannibal pressed a finger to his neck to feel his heart rate slow. The organ beat a solid, steady rhythm now that actually started to lull Hannibal into his own unconsciousness. He only fought it briefly, solely to bask in Will's visage as he laid totally at ease in the monster's bed. He pulled him into the safety of his arms and allowed himself to drift into a rare deep sleep.

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Will awoke feeling a bit woozy but uniquely well-rested in a way he hadn't since Hannibal stayed over at his house. He tried to roll away from the stifling heat but he was stopped by heavy weights pinning him to something solid, distinctly *alive.*

His hands were buried in Hannibal's soft long sleeve shirt. Will wanted to ask how he ended up in his bed, as this was definitely not the one he fell asleep in last night, but he was so comfortable right now that he almost didn't care. The morning light caught the soft edge of Hannibal’s fringe, the ashe blonde strands almost golden in the hues of dawn. They shifted slightly back and forth with the movement of his sleep breathing.

…Wait a second.

A little smirk found its place on Will’s lips. He moved silently forward to nip at the shell of Hannibal's ear.

With a small chuckle he whispered, “How long have you been awake?”

Hannibal’s arms around his back tightened, his voice was muffled by Will’s hair. “Not long.”

“And how long were you planning on pretending to sleep?”

Instead of answering, Hannibal produced a low hum that was closer to the satisfied purr of a big cat, and pressed more of his weight onto Will, effectively pinning him to the mattress. The sleepy morning affection was not something Will had expected from the other man, but he welcomed it all the same.

There was something so…picturesque about waking up in someone's arms. It was something that Will had stopped hoping for a long time ago. He’d had partners in the past, but they were always short affairs, he’d only awoken to another person in his bed a couple times, but they'd always felt forced, and it’d been at least a decade. It didn't feel forced with Hannibal, it felt natural, safe.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, simply pressed close. One of Hannibal’s hands found its way underneath Will’s borrowed sweater and was rubbing tiny concentric circles into the small of his back. Will slotted their legs together and sighed into the repetitive motion, it almost soothed him to sleep again.

Eventually his bladder forced him to abandon the tantalizing heat of Hannibal’s bed. It was only then, standing in front of the mirror in the attached bathroom that he noticed the long sleeved, high collared sleep shirt he was wearing. He hadn’t had it on when he went to bed, did Hannibal put it on him in the night? Or had he donned it in an unconscious state? The latter wouldn’t surprise him as he’d definitely shed clothing while sleeping, this was just a natural progression of his unique brand of crazy.

By the time he relieved himself and rinsed the morning breath from his mouth, Hannibal had vacated the room. There was a small pile of clothing outside the bathroom door and the bed was made, it reminded Will of a hotel room, excluding the slightly macabre decor.

He slipped the clothes on- Hannibal’s it would seem as they were a tad too big for him. They still complimented his frame better than his own, clothing of this quality tended to do that. He returned to the guest bedroom to locate his own discarded work clothes, but they were missing.

The distant smell of cooking wafted up the stairs, alerting Will to the location of the home's permanent resident, though Will could have probably guessed. It was becoming increasingly obvious that when he was home, Hannibal spent the majority of his time in his kitchen, even when he was at Will's he'd naturally gravitated towards the space.

He noticed Hannibal's nostrils flare and a tiny crinkle around his eyes. Will's presence must have been noticed.

"You never did tell me how I ended up in your bed last night." His tone wasn't admonishing, he was still basking in the warm glow of the domestic morning.

"You were sleepwalking. I awoke to you standing in my doorway. I was worried you might attempt to navigate the stairs so I decided sharing a room might be more prudent so I could prevent you from wandering again. I apologize if I was overstepping."

"No it's alright, it was…nice. Though next time I think I'd like to enter your bed of my own volition." Shit, that didn't come out right. "I mean to sleep, if that's what you want."

Hannibal chuckled and caught his eyes as he turned from the stove. "I would like that, next time." He didn't mention the sweater, so Will must have dressed himself. For once, he was grateful that his unconscious self was so sentient.

"Your clothes are in the wash, but you're free to borrow those as long as you need."

Hannibal didn't seem in any rush to talk about last night. Maybe he didn't believe there was anything to talk about? From the heated gazes he kept shooting Will, he clearly didn't want it to be a one-time occurrence. Will wanted to trust him, to bask in the rare pleasant feelings, but there were discussions that needed to happen in the light of day that seemed inconsequential the night before.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes, Will?"

"What was last night to you?"

"A pleasurable experience that I am amicable to repeat."

"Is that all?"

"Not necessarily, but that depends."

"On what?"

"On what it was for you." His eyes were deep and imploring, dark brown that didn't seem affected by the morning light. Still without expectation, though- they only begged Will's honesty.

"It was a release, I suppose. A burst of built up pressure."

“A cut to cease the swelling.”

“There certainly was enough blood.” Hannibal plated his breakfast, a protein scramble, the first meal they shared together. “You’ve made this for me before.”

“It seemed appropriate, a new beginning, or perhaps simply a new chapter. Did the blood bother you?”

“I wouldn’t say entirely new. We were certainly building to something and I’m glad it was this. The blood didn’t bother me, it was savage, primal. How I imagine you hunt. I liked it, I liked sharing it with you.”

“Then I’ll make my intentions clear, I would like to keep building this with you, Will. Your own savagery was beautiful, I fear I’d grieve if I never saw it again.”

“Hannibal, your whole neck is purple, it looks like you got strangled. That doesn’t bother you?” From this close, Will could see the large dark hickeys covering Hannibal’s neck. They were high, hard to hide, he felt pride and despair in equal measures for being their sire. At the time it had been so easy, it felt so *right* to tear into each other like that, but this wasn’t normal. Weren’t first kisses with a new person supposed to be more sweet? Demure?

“It does not. You contain darkness, Will. It is a part of you, a part you’ve alluded to frequently in our sessions. If I did not find it alluring, we would not be here.”

“Oh,” Will was floored. That someone could find the part of him that he so desperately and guiltily tried to reign in attractive, was impossible, or at the very least improbable. But Hannibal, once again, proved that he was beyond Will’s predictions. He did his best to muffle the undisguised hope in his expression, though he doubted it was very effective.

“And besides, red is quite a fetching color on you.” Will ducked his head back to his sausage and eggs, ironically to stop Hannibal from seeing his face begin to redden. This was a dangerous trail of conversation if Will had any hope of coming into Quantico today.

“Jack’s not going to approve, neither will Alana, and won’t you get in trouble?”

“Nothing we have done is illegal, as I’ve said you’re not my patient. It’s a fool’s errand to worry about things that may or may not come to pass, you already have enough on your plate.”

“What about your soulmate?” A tinge of desperation colored his tone. This couldn’t be as easy as Hannibal was making it, nothing in his life was.

“My soulmate is a complicated matter, but they also have no bearing on my desires involving you. If you need an excuse to stall this, you will not find one in me, but I will not beg you to continue.”

“I didn’t mean to make you believe I was seeking excuses, it's just that this bond is easy. Last night was easy. I didn’t know relationships could be like that. That is what this is, right?” Hannibal’s eyes softened, he came around the kitchen island to stand at Will’s side. He

brought one hand up to caress Will's cheek, tender and sweet. Maybe he didn't have to worry about the savagery when gentle humanity was displayed in equal measure.

"Yes Will, if you'll have me."

He nodded and leaned into the warmth of Hannibal's hand, laying light kisses against his palm.

"I believe the wash is finished," Hannibal said after a moment, his voice soft, slightly breathless.

Will let out a small displeased sound as he extracted himself. "Then I believe that's my cue to leave, it's already later than I promised Jack I'd be in."

"Well you best not keep Uncle Jack waiting." Reluctance was allowed on Hannibal's face, Will felt it, though it was indistinguishable from his own.

"I'll see you soon?"

"As soon as your killers will allow." He laughed, if that was the stipulation, he'd never see Hannibal again.

"Hopefully before that." The doctor's responding grin was a rare one that showed teeth, Will took a moment to admire his sharp canines.

"Hopefully."

Chapter End Notes

made out with my own arm so i could find a good metaphor and it really does look like animal tracks. who woulda thought

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wasn't glad that a new body dropped. Each new killer affected him, gave his brain a fun new trick to torture him with, even if he *could* admit his appreciation for the beauty in the brutal violence every corpse evoked. However, it did give him a new target to focus on.

With the doldrum that came from the stagnation of the ripper case, the team had become anxious for something to pursue. Jack wanted it to be the ripper, but unless the killer underwent a drastic personality shift, they were left following his afterimages. So when Will had shown up late with a ring of poorly hidden suck bruises and tooth marks high on his neck, they were on him like gnats to flytape.

Jack hadn't been pleased, but it was clear he really *really* didn't want to involve himself in whatever fooling around Will did outside of work. Katz, Price, and Zeller had been a little harder to shake off though. None of them were amatuer detectives and once it was clear that Will wasn't willing to divulge who he spent the night with, theories began to fly.

Alana was their first guess, followed by some accusations of the professors in his department. Price thought it was a one-night stand, some stranger that Will didn't even know the name of. No theory really stuck though, and Will wasn't doing much encouragement one way or another. Hannibal's name didn't come up once, not even tangentially, which relieved him as much as it irked him. He didn't like the reminder of just how ill-suited they were for each other.

Either they would have to learn to be more discreet, or Will would have to invest in some concealer, he would not be going through the scrutiny again. Though, he would admit, it was novel to have attention on him for a reason other than his declining sanity. Beverly even offered him a fistbump and an emphatic 'nice,' which made Will feel a little like a college student showing up in the early hours of the morning to the wry smile of his roommate. It was refreshing considering he was in his mid thirties.

Their teasing and half-assed sleuth work faded with the bruises, though Price continued to playfully call him 'loverboy,' which was honestly just endearing. It only really came to a halt at the sight of the newest corpse.

This was an interesting one, another killer who had an appreciation for the arts. Not the ripper though, all the organs were accounted for. He popped a few aspirin and pushed his mind slowly outwards, reaching for the musician behind this instrument.

Jack cleared the scene, leaving him alone in the huge concert hall. The tap of his feet echoed dramatically in the space, perfect acoustics.

The exposed vocal cords were hardened, blindingly white in the harsh overhead stage lights, coated in a fine layer of dust- rosin from the bow. A remnant of a solo performance.

Will drew a bow across the strings, forced to play the cello neck more in the style of a standing bass. He played a long, open-stringed double stop, not like it would matter if his fingers pressed down on the neck of the instrument, the strings weren't elongated enough to change the pitch.

The music was still haunting, it filled the room with a rich, mahogany sound that reverberated against the walls. The echoes created a round that was reminiscent of low chanting, originating from the deepest parts of the lungs.

Sharp staccato slaps resounded from the audience. Someone was commending his performance.

Clap, clop, clap, clop, clap.

It was hard to distinguish between Garrett Jacob Hobbs' applause and the stag's hooves, ever present. His hallucinations were creative like that. It probably said something that he was getting used to them, so his mind was making them more varied, strange, and realistic. The newest torture was his brain gifting him sounds of wounded animals that were indistinguishable from reality.

Hopefully the sound of a dying coyote, one that he couldn't ignore even if he was certain it was a fiction, was a one-time vision. Though, knowing his own brain, it was unlikely.

At least there were no sounds of wounded canines here. The only death bell that tolled was the low eerie noise that emanated from the cut-open trombonist.

Sour bile attempted to worm its way up Will's throat as Hobbs applauded his performance. Not because of the body, though it stunk of death and chemicals, but rather the reminder of the man he'd enjoyed killing.

There was a certain grace to this scene, a description he would usually save for the ripper, but this killer wasn't half bad in terms of artistic integrity. There was care and skill that went into this, it wasn't his first kill, but it was his first time putting on a performance.

The ripper's last sounder wasn't long ago, maybe he was inspired.

Jack was still reeling from the loss of his lead, but when push came to shove, he gratefully took Will's profile. This musician was younger, still developing his design, the treatment of the vocal cords suggested a professional in the string music industry, though more likely on the production side rather than performance. He'd be unmarried, unmarked, and with enough wealth to have his own space for his hobby. It should narrow the search down by a large margin.

His headache was getting worse. Hobbs' claps sent sharp pulses through his head, in time with the throbbing of his brain. He swore he could feel it pushing on his skull. The drive home would be painful during the bright hours of daytime, but it would be worse if he attempted to stay until nightfall.

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He was able to ignore the chittering coming from his chimney for all of five minutes. It wasn't real, it didn't make sense that he'd hear a second trapped animal in as many days, there was no creature stuck in the wall.

The sounds heightened in pitch, becoming increasingly pathetic. His resolve cracked just like the brickwork under the sledgehammer he fished out of the barn. The hole widened and with it came no signs of life, but maybe, he desperately hoped, he'd be able to see the animal if the gap was just a bit larger.

He kept swinging until the hole in the brick was big enough that he could stick his head in. Still no signs of life.

A sharp rap of knuckles sounded on his door. The chittering hadn't stopped, it seemed to get louder, more insistent as Will walked away.

He was met with Alana's concerned expression. "Will, are you alright? I heard banging."

"There's an animal trapped in my chimney."

"Oh? Well let me see the poor thing."

The distressed sounds stopped as soon as Alana entered his home. The animal must have exited through the top, he didn't want to consider the other (more likely) possibility. Her eyes shone with pity, so much it made him nauseous, he was so sick of her seeing him as something just utterly broken, though perhaps it might be a correct assessment at the moment.

"What kind of animal was it?"

"It might've been a raccoon." Or Will's burning brain.

"Might've been?"

"Well, by the time I answered the door it climbed out the top."

"At least it got out." He could tell she didn't believe him, he didn't even need to look at her, the doubt was so tangible in her voice.

"What are you doing out?" He managed to keep defensiveness out of his tone, but not spite.

"Was in the neighborhood, thought I'd come make some noise," *Check to make sure Graham hadn't gone off the deep end.* "Looks like you're making plenty of noise all by yourself." He grimaced, her attempt to lighten the mood was appreciated but ultimately unsuccessful.

Reluctantly, he met her eyes, it was everything he could do to keep his expression in check. She was trying for comforting, but the slew of other thoughts surrounding made her care seem dull and sour.

He saw himself in her eyes- something he always tried to avoid but rarely was able to. She saw a man who was rapidly descending from unstable to self-destructive and dangerous. She

thought about him in her office, deciding which medication and treatment she might prescribe, his wide-eyed expression reminded her of Abigail's. Privately, she thought he should be admitted.

In her vision, she saw him in a support group, in a soft room he couldn't destroy, taking pills that calmed the voices in his head once and for all. In his own, he saw the BSHCI, steel bars, and injections that kept him docile. She didn't see the violence he carried so close to his chest as madness gripped him by the head and shook. Maybe he wouldn't start in the BSHCI, but the white walls and pitying, placating nurses would drive him there in record time, he was sure of it.

Underneath all that, below the pity, clinical curiosity, and desire to fix, was a subtle attraction that confused her. Her own fantasies that she wasn't keen to indulge, involved him slowly returning to sanity, grateful to her for remaining at his side, and gradually falling fiercely for her. She craved domesticity, someone to understand the difficulties of her position, same as him.

It was so intrinsically *good,* and by relaying his treatment to Hannibal, she'd given the possibility a fighting chance. She saw them kissing sweetly, her taking the lead after weeks of shy glances and heartfelt confessions, not a drop of blood in sight,

At one point, a relationship like that was all he wanted. He tricked himself into believing that he could ignore the dark red part of his psyche. He wasn't the pure, tortured soul Alana saw, he housed a savagry that he now realized he didn't have to exorcise to be a man that was desired.

She thought she knew him, but nobody really knew him. Hannibal was the only one who knew that the real Will Graham was buried under layers and layers of borrowed and fabricated personality, and that the real Will Graham was not a man who could be considered wholly good. And still he wanted him. Alana's desire would not be so forgiving.

Cruelly, he wondered if he could shatter her perception.

"I think you should go, Alana. I've got a hole to fix."

"Are you sure you want to be alone right now?" He didn't, but it wasn't her company he craved at the moment. They'd been so busy last week, but twice Hannibal had found the time to bring him lunch to the empty lecture hall, effectively breaking up the days' typical solitude. Will wanted his company, his lithe figure to be the one darkening his doorstep.

He nodded to his dogs, returning to their places at his feet now that the banging stopped, instead of responding to her.

"Your dogs can't take the place of human connection, Will. I want to help you."

"You're not my psychiatrist, you're not obligated to help me."

"I want to help you as your friend, not your psychiatrist." If only she actually believed that. "It's common and encouraged to confide in those not simply in professional help settings."

She wasn’t giving up, he had to give her something. He couldn’t divulge more about the hallucinations, she already believed him crazy enough, but she needed to know that he wasn't the man she thought he was, at least not wholly. If she couldn't see the wrongness that he felt surrounded him like a thick dark shroud, maybe he could show her.

He looked her straight in the eyes, painful as it was, and undid the top couple buttons of his flannel.

“Wait Will, I-I didn’t-” She cut herself off with a startled gasp as he yanked down the elastic collar of his turtleneck. Obviously, the mark was too large for her to see the whole thing without him completely divesting his shirt, but as he stretched and moved his collar, her expression became more and more rattled as she realized the size of it.

“Is that…?”

“Yeah. Showed up a few months ago, just stopped growing.”

“Will its-” *Beautiful* the fanged party of him responded. Disgusting, horrible, terrifying, he corrected. “*huge.”* Her voice was tinged with fear and he wasn't sure if it was for him or because of him. “I don’t understand though, who-?”

“One of the killers Jack has me chasing, I’m not sure which one,” He didn’t know why he was lying now, but the ripper seemed to have his own mystique. It sounded ridiculous for Will to claim him even if it was the truth, as if he was declaring bigfoot or the Lochness monster was his soulmate.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, I’ve known for weeks, Alana. I can understand them, it's not that much of a stretch. We have barely one degree of separation, I can feel them moving at the same time as me, breathing in sync.”

“You’re not a killer, Will. You catch men like that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t it? If we were perfectly suited it wouldn’t be the size of my entire chest. You know the trend with large marks, they’re never easy. One half’s in another country, or prison, or don’t speak the same language. I know what mine means, and there’s nothing you can do to help me.” He could tell she still didn’t believe him, but the mark had rattled her. The perception she held of him was starting to drip and wobble like a clay figurine doused in water before it could be fired in a kiln.

“Have you told Jack?”

“No, and I’m not going to. This changes nothing about the investigations, I’m still going to catch his killers. I can’t quit and he already has me in therapy.”

“Well what about Hannibal? You need to talk to someone about this if you won’t talk to me.”

Christ, he hadn’t even considered Hannibal when he impulsively pulled down his shirt. He should have told him first. He should have told him the night they kissed, or any time before

now. They hadn't been able to have a repeat night yet, but there were many opportunities during appointments and brief lunches that he could've said *something.*

"I'm working on that."

"Will…"

"I really have to fix this, we can talk about it later." He had no intention to, but it seemed to placate her for the moment.

"Alright I'll just, I'll see you soon."

"Yeah." She left without any fanfare, he felt her resignation as well as a sense of being out-of-her-depth, something she wasn't used to feeling.

He listened to her tires crunch on the gravel drive and he was alone once again in his little house. For just a moment, he allowed stillness, he heaved a few deep shaky breaths and tried to keep his mind on track. The first thing he had to do was board up the hole in his chimney, he wouldn't focus on anything else for the time being.

He grabbed the boards, nails, and hammer from the barn and replaced the sledgehammer. He shot it a disparaging look, it wasn't the tool's fault his self-destructive mind finally bore physical consequences, but it was easier to blame an inanimate object.

The dogs got let out as he worked through his task, another item to check off his list. After this, he would let them back in, feed them, and decide what to do about the shitshow he just instigated.

It went by too quickly, the dogs were uniquely orderly tonight, they provided little distraction. Far too soon, the hole was sealed, the dogs were fed, and Will was left floundering. He'd even taken the time to clean all the dust and debris and still the onward march of time forced him to confront his actions and do *something.*

He was lost, angry at himself, and painfully lonely even though Alana just left. He wanted his useless will to be taken from him.

It was snowing and Baltimore was over an hour away from Wolf Trap. Hannibal was likely busy tonight. How much was Will willing to disregard in the face of his desire to see the man? The answer was, apparently, a lot as he was still listing reasons to stay home as he started his car and pulled onto the road.

Chapter End Notes

shorter chap but we got sum fun ones coming up and there wasn't a good breaking point aahh (also yall have been so sweet with ur comments recently im so <33)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He'd been sloppy, not an adjective he enjoyed attributing to himself, but an apt one nonetheless. Tobias Budge had been allowed to see him create a scene and Hannibal hadn't even noticed he had an audience, he was getting lazy in his arrogance. It was only through luck that Budge was a lonely man that shared his proclivities, rather than someone who fell a little more typically in general morality.

This would not be a mistake he made twice, and one he would rectify promptly. Budge was a liability, no matter what he claimed, and Hannibal was already delicately crafting the company he desired, if he truly desired it at all. He had no need for the companionship of a man who was a risk to his station, no matter if their feelings towards the general populace fell along the same lines.

He was dreading the destruction to his home that a skirmish would certainly bring when a hesitant knock echoed along the high walls.

"Expecting someone?" Budge's poised confidence dripped off him, though perhaps a tinge of fear crossed at the prospect that Hannibal might have brought backup, despite the notion being utterly absurd.

"No." When he returned, Budge would be long gone. The hunt would have to be resumed at a later date.

On any other night, he would be delighted to have Will anxious on his doorstep, but tonight he'd allowed his quarry to escape unscathed. The longer Budge remained alive, the more likely it was that Hannibal's freedom was at stake. Still, he greeted Will with a warm smile, his presence was among Hannibal's favorites after all.

"Good evening, Will. What do I owe the pleasure?"

"I showed Alana my mark." Whatever Hannibal was expecting, it wasn't that. Anger, cold and irrational flashed through him quick as a shot from a rifle. He didn't let it show, not a single twitch of muscle broke through his practiced mask.

"Oh? You've known her for quite some time, what compelled you to reveal it to her now?" He helped Will shed his coat and locked the front door behind him.

"I heard an animal trapped in my chimney, broke through the wall to get it out. Didn't find anything inside. Alana showed up, she looked at me and maybe her face changed, I don't know. But she knew."

"What did she know?"

“There was no animal in the chimney, it was only in my head.” There was a desperation in Will’s tone that was becoming more and more pronounced as his brain continued to swell, time was running out on him surviving the infection unscathed.

“So you bore your mark as a distraction?”

“Maybe, she gave me this look and I saw myself through her eyes. I couldn't stand it.”

“What did you see?”

“She saw a good man, someone she could fix and live happily ever after with. I'm not a good man, Hannibal. I can’t be if my soulmate’s the ripper.” He didn't like to feel unsteady, but now twice in one night, Will had taken him by surprise. He scrambled to find where he slipped, where he'd shown more of his hand than intended, but came up short. How Will’s beautiful mind connected the meager clues was beyond him, this could be more dangerous than he anticipated.

“The ripper? What brought you to that conclusion? And I hadn't been aware that you'd developed a soulmark until tonight.”

“I just know, I don't have any proof, but he's the only option that makes sense. The timeline fits. When it first showed up, I thought it was the copycat's, but since they're the same person…”

He had to swallow his anger and surprise and present a front of care, reason, and sympathy. He'd been preparing to reveal his own mark at their next private encounter, but now it was imperative that Will remain blind. And preferably mute- he'd already told Alana.

“You've kept this to yourself for that long? Oh Will, I'm glad you told me.”

All Will wanted was understanding without pity, his anxious expression brightened considerably with Hannibal's easy acceptance. Alana must have given him the opposite, likely she only offered disbelieving resistance and an implied suggestion that he'd lost his mind.

“You're sure it's him though? It must be quite the dramatic mark to earn your certainty.”

“It's the most horrible thing I've ever seen. It's large and ugly, I feel like he's stained me, marked me as defective.” He folded Will into his arms, partly to comfort, partly to hide his own face. Will’s talent for noticing microexpressions would pick up on the displeased twitch of his lip. Their mark was beautiful, an exquisite piece of art to be admired. Had Will’s words come from any other person, he would have killed them.

Will melted in his hold, reluctant to let go when Hannibal released him and led the pair into his kitchen. As he expected, Budge had made himself scarce.

“You have a guest?”

“A colleague. You just missed him.”

“Didn’t finish his dinner.”

“An urgent call of some sort, he had to leave suddenly. This benefits you, because I have dessert for two.” The pudding was a decadent, delicate thing, rich with a light, fluffy cream to compliment. Budge’s palette was more refined, he'd pick up on the subtle notes of nutmeg and ginger, but Will’s company more than made up for a lack of distinguished taste.

After a few appreciative bites, Will spoke. His voice was small, he didn't meet Hannibal's eyes. “You know, I wanted it to be yours. I wanted it to be you.”

“We do not get to decide the hand fate deals us, but we are not without agency. This has not changed my emotions in regards to you.” His intentions were a different story. He felt backed into a corner with a door behind him he hadn't wanted to open.

“How could it not? When you said you appreciated my ‘darkness,’ I doubt this is what you had in mind.”

“It wasn't, but I admit you continue to surprise me.”

He drew Will from his chair and into his chest. Hannibal watched as ease and wonder replaced terror and anxiety. When Will kissed him it tasted like sweet cream, and heat when he nipped him. To Hannibal, it felt like a goodbye.

It was minutes before he broke the connection, but if they didn't part now, Hannibal might be tempted to keep him, at great risk to his own personal safety. He’d let Will too close, and he wasn’t ready to accept his metamorphosis. He could not abandon his life’s creed to a man he’d only met a scant few months ago, soulmate or not.

Will clutched him close as they laid their foreheads together, he almost drew Hannibal back in before he spoke, steeling himself for what must be done.

“I hesitate telling you this as it borders on a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality.” He kept his tone steady, sure, disinterested. Will might’ve been able to detect the practiced lack of emotion, but at this point what could be done? “A patient told me today he suspects a friend of his might be involved with the murder at the symphony.”

He looked caught off guard. “Right, um, what did he say about his friend?” Will drew back and attempted to don his own mask of professionalism. Hannibal could tell he wanted to discard it, to fall into the temptation that Hannibal offered. For once, he didn’t let him.

“He owns a music store in Baltimore, specializing in string instruments. Perhaps you should interview him?”

He responded with a distracted nod and left shortly after, an ‘early morning’ was his reasoning. At Hannibal’s front doorstep, he hesitated for a moment and pulled him in close, slotting their mouths together once again.

“You’ll cook for me again soon?”

“I’d love nothing more.” He carefully avoided making a promise he couldn’t keep. Will didn’t notice, he kissed him again, less chaste than before. This may be the last time Hannibal got to touch him like this, he couldn’t help but respond.

There on his snowy open doorstep, he clutched Will hard, one hand around his shoulders, the other buried in his hair. Will’s grip on his hips was bruising, he wished the marks that he left would be permanent.

He wanted one last taste of Will’s blood to memorize and savor. He dug his sharp canines into the soft, fleshy, slightly chapped part of Will’s kiss-swollen lip. The other man let out a soft needy sound and dug his thumbs further into Hannibal’s hips, grinding them even closer together. The skin broke under another harsh nip, Hannibal couldn’t help the relieved breath that forced its way out of him when the taste finally flooded his mouth.

For a moment, that was all he took. He stored the taste in the deep central chambers of his memory palace where it would preserved as long as he lived. He knew that this meal was a delicacy, and as it implied, he would likely not get another chance to savor it.

Will grew impatient with his stillness and pushed his tongue into Hannibal’s waiting mouth, as if he was spoon feeding him the thick, boiling liquid that coated his lips. When they parted, both their lips were stained once again, Will looked more than a little pleased with himself.

Hannibal reached into his overcoat and withdrew his pocket square, gingerly he dabbed Will’s lips until the sluggish drip of blood clotted. He parted with a final gentle press of their lips that sullied Will’s freshly cleaned ones with the red that still adorned Hannibal’s, and left him to retreat into his now-empty home.

He watched Will leave through a ground floor window. He wondered if this was the last time he'd see Will alive. The thought made him want to pick up his phone and tell him to forget everything he said and beg him to return to Hannibal's home. It wasn't right that Budge may get to kill him, Will’s life belonged to Hannibal. But that was a choice he'd forsaken when he'd chosen safety over passion.

This was all necessary, he reasoned. Will wouldn't survive the transformation Hannibal laid out for him if he could not survive this. Budge was calculating and ruthless, but Will had years of experience from active police work and a whole library of dangerous men to draw inspiration from.

Worry was a useless emotion, and he'd long since learned how to discard useless emotions.

Either Will would kill Budge and bring himself one step closer to his full potential, or Budge would kill him and Hannibal would kill him in turn. Bloodshed was never a simple, orderly thing, it was why Hannibal craved it, turned it into his life’s passion. He reminded himself that he was an adaptable man who thrived on chaos, his conflicted heart would not overrun a decision already made and enacted.

All that was left to do was clean his kitchen and make sure he was well-rested. Tomorrow would bring violence, he wanted all the advantages he could take.

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“I just killed two men.” Tobias and Franklyn were still speaking. Hannibal even sensed himself responding, but his consciousness retreated briefly to his memory palace. He couldn’t stay long, not with the barely contained ferocity Budge stormed into his office with, but his Will demanded his presence. He had no stored image of his corpse, so it was the beautiful form that he admired only the night before that haunted him.

Franklyn’s body dropped without a care. The kill hadn’t sparked a single emotion, it couldn’t when his every neuron was oversaturated in sterile rage. Honed instinct and practiced mastery propelled him forward, matching Budge’s blows.

They were fairly evenly balanced, Budge was younger and had a slight advantage of size, but Hannibal had more experience and the home-turf edge. Tobias was fuelled by betrayal and desperation, Hannibal only had his rage and encroaching grief, both powerful motivators for adrenaline.

Eventually, he gained the upper hand, luck and quick reflexes were the only deciding factors. The fight was over as soon as Tobias lost the use of one of his arms. The heavy stag figurine was not something Hannibal had anticipated using as a murder weapon when he introduced it to his office, but it was perfectly suited to smiting the man he’d subdued.

He took a moment to wipe his prints from Franklyn’s neck and retreated to his desk. His rage was slowly dissipating with the release of its target. It had served its purpose and now was returning to the tightly sealed room where Hannibal kept most of his emotions.

His grief was not so quick to retreat. It sat heavy in his gut, demanded vengeance he could not provide, not when he himself had allowed this to happen.

Will was dead.

His Will had been killed by the dead man spilling dark blood across his carpet.

Not for the first time, Hannibal pondered time travel and resurrection, to save his Will, to punish Tobias more horribly. But there was nothing to be done in the silence of his office. He had to call the authorities, this kill would be attributed solely to self-defense and he would fall under no scrutiny, but he could not bring himself to reach for his phone just yet.

He shed his suit jacket, vest, and tie. The top two buttons of his collared shirt were undone to reveal his collarbones. He peered down, the mark was still there, black, bold, and proud. When would it begin to fade?

Time slipped around him, he made the necessary calls from a body lacking a self that was currently wandering through a maze of expressive blue eyes and flannels. He’d made his choices, now forced to bear the consequences. How wrong he was to believe he was prepared.

His veil had enough autonomy to answer questions and refuse a ride to the hospital- he preferred to stitch himself together anyways. He’d already accepted that his Will was gone,

but every person that entered his tattered office simply drove the point further. He joined Will in front of the fire in the little home he'd installed in an empty room of his memory palace.

He remained there, comfortably warm at the man's side, and here he would stay as long as possible. Here nothing else could touch his Will, he would remain safe now, after Hannibal failed to protect him.

Failed to protect him, as if you didn't send him into the path of a loaded gun.

It wasn't until Jack stalked into his office that he allowed himself to navigate out of his palace. The broad man stepped into the room and he felt as if time resumed. He hadn't even noticed that it stopped until he saw Will, alive and mostly unharmed. Grief died, along with the imagined Will- he was nothing in comparison to the man making his way towards Hannibal's side. Naked relief showed itself across Hannibal's features, but he couldn't be bothered to cover it, not now, not with his Will looking at him like a prisoner seeing the sun for the first time in years.

He saw the precise moment Will noticed the marks on his neck he hadn't thought to cover. It hadn't been his intention to reveal the mark, not when he'd been confident it would fade away shortly, but he couldn't bring himself to fear the consequences at the moment.

Will's trek faltered and his eyes glowed with a sheen of something so hopeful it nearly took his breath away.

"I was worried you were dead." He may have to lie and fake his emotions for all of Jack's questions, but in that moment, his every expression was honest for Will and Will alone.

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For fifteen minutes, Will was stranded with the corpses of two police officers and the preserved guts of at least twenty individuals. Baltimore wasn't a large city, in fifteen minutes Budge could be almost anywhere inside its borders. In another ten, he could be miles down the freeway.

The empty eyes of the officers stared up at him. Their eyes didn't flit and shudder like Buddish's, they just stayed clouded over, a reminder that Will let this happen when he allowed himself to be distracted by the imaginary sounds his mind produced. He didn't kill these men, but he felt responsible- he knew Budge was dangerous from the moment they set foot in the shop.

The ERT arrived a few minutes before Jack. Body bags were loaded into the back of their trucks and evidence was tagged. It took multiple trips for them to load up all the gut jars- this would probably solve quite a few of the missing persons cases in the area.

"What happened?"

"Hannibal told me one of his patients mentioned Budge was acting strange, and that his shop might be worth investigating. Evidently, it was."

“He got away and killed two officers in the process. How did that happen?” Jack was fuming, but what could Will say? He got distracted from interviewing a prospective serial killer because he was hallucinating? Maybe he *should* say something, even though Jack would likely never look at him the same again. Or maybe not. Nothing else had convinced him to let Will go anyway.

“Stepped out for a minute, when I came back he had killed both officers and fled further into the shop. I followed and he attacked me, got a shot off before he could finish the job. Non-fatal. He fled.”

“Well, do you know where he went?”

“No, he mi-” Before Will could finish, Jack’s phone rang. He shot Will a glance before answering.

“Crawford speaking.” A tinny voice spoke quickly, Jack’s expression darkened as he listened. “Alright, we’ll be there in ten minutes.” He hung up and stormed out of the shop with a quickness that was uncharacteristic for a man his size.

“Jack-?”

“Budge showed up at Dr. Lecter’s office.” Fear pulsed through his system, Hannibal wasn’t an officer, he wasn’t trained. Shit, if he was hurt or *worse*- “Lecter called for an ERT, there’s two more bodies. Apparently, Budge killed his patient and then tried to kill him, but Lecter was able to fend him off.”

Relief doused him like cold water from a showerhead. Hannibal was well enough to call for help, he wasn’t *dead* , and hopefully not hurt too bad. Though, there were many cases of adrenaline giving a few precious minutes to people who were fatally wounded.

He beat Jack to his car.

Wait, what did Jack mean by ‘fended off?’ Had Hannibal killed him? “Budge is dead?”

“Yeah, or at least that’s what he told the authorities. We’ll know for sure once we arrive.”

Will’s mind was buzzing, Hannibal killed someone? Even if it was in self-defense, Hannibal still took a life, same as Will. Did he feel that same elation, that same sense of righteous violence that set Will on this path in the first place? What if he didn’t? What if he only saw how terribly ugly it was, and Will lost the one man he could truly expect to accept him?

It was selfish to even consider when Hannibal could be bleeding out at that very moment. The ride to the doctor’s home office only lasted about ten minutes, likely less as Jack took one of the officer’s cars and flew down the road, sirens blaring.

Hannibal’s patient entrance was already flooded with local officers, cleaners, and EMTs. They bustled about bearing cameras, bandages, and bagged office supplies coated in blood. They parted for Jack swiftly and Will followed in his broad wake.

The familiar office was in disarray, but he barely noted the shattered table, knocked over furniture, and two body bags when he saw Hannibal slouched down at his desk. He was covered in cuts and bruises, his hair had fallen from its typical slicked back position, and his normally impeccably prim suit laid disheveled and loose around the collar.

As Will approached he noticed little dark marks, they sat right under where the high collar of his dress shirts normally covered.

“I was worried you were dead.” He ripped his gaze to meet Hannibal’s, a relief that wasn’t his own burrowed into his head and surrounded him. He wanted to reach out and feel the man, to reassure both of them the other was here, whole and relatively uninjured.

Will didn’t take his hand, but he planted his shin against Hannibal’s own. Their sighs of relief were mirrored and Will allowed his gaze to once more drop to Hannibal’s neck as Jack questioned him.

“Tobias Budge killed two Baltimore police officers, nearly killed an FBI special agent, and after all that, his first stop is here, at your office.” Normally, Will respected Jack’s naturally distrusting nature, but at the moment Will’s top priority was getting Hannibal alone. He wanted to check his wounds, see if he was as alright as the front he put forward presented, and peel back his shirt collar. He needed confirmation that the little black points continued down, lest hope keep blooming in his chest until it choked him.

“He came to kill my patient.” Jack continued to push and Will could see a subtle weariness start to take over Hannibal’s features. This wasn’t productive, it wasn't right that Hannibal was being questioned like a suspect when he just took out a dangerous killer, single-handedly and unarmed. Honestly, he should be praised.

“You killed him?” Harsh and accusatory. Hannibal's soft, horrified ‘yes’ was what finally spurred Will into action.

“Give it a rest Jack, he’ll give a full statement tomorrow.”

“Will-”

“I'm taking him home, I trust you've got this covered?” Jack looked stricken that Will was the one steamrolling him, but he couldn't give a shit at the moment. Before he could say anything else, Will helped Hannibal from his seat and out of his office.

Together they made their way into Hannibal’s sitting room- convenient that the office he saw his patients in was connected to his home. They progressed at a snail’s pace, Hannibal’s limp was pronounced.

“I feel like I've dragged you into my world.” Guilt and the heady prospect of understanding warred within him. Involvement in the violence Will was exposed to constantly would only get him hurt or worse, killed- it almost had today. On the other hand, Hannibal had walked away the decided victor, he was clearly capable of defending himself. What’s more, he’d distributed his self-defending justice *with his hands.* The violence felt more pronounced and righteous than what Will dispensed at the Hobbs’ residence.

“I got here on my own, but I appreciate the company.” He deposited the slightly taller man as gracefully as he could into one of his plush armchairs. Hannibal took his hand as soon as their contact broke; Will was grateful, he’d be dreading the departure of touch.

Now that the bustling company and Jack’s scrutiny had vanished, Will finally took stock of the various injuries Hannibal was sporting. Most notable was the gash in his leg that he hadn’t stopped applying pressure to, but various smaller injuries came to light as Will started to catalog them. His lip was busted, a bruise was forming around his eye, and there was a shallow gash that encircled his forearm. He might even have a minor concussion, but the stumbling could have been equally attributed to the stab wound.

Despite its inappropriateness, he couldn’t help how startlingly attractive he found Hannibal flecked with blood that may or may not be his own.

“How come you didn’t call for an ambulance?”

“My injuries are not so severe that I cannot patch myself up.” Even though he couldn’t in his right mind support Hannibal’s decision, he could understand it. He also avoided hospitals whenever possible, though it seemed ironic that an ex-surgeon would dodge an emergency room.

“Where’s your first aid kit?”

“Under the sink in the bathroom, second door on your left.” Reluctantly, he withdrew his hand and went to fetch the supplies. At first he overshot the bathroom and was met with a locked door, he turned around and saw the dark tile of the bathroom inside the previous room, and all considerations for the one that was locked were forgotten.

The kit was extensive, complete with various types of thread, bandages, injectables, and sterile tools that could only be medical grade. Hannibal reached first for the bandage shears and began to cut through the expensive fabric of the leg of his suit pants, just above the knee. He grimaced, but Will suspected that had less to do with the injury and more to do with the ruined clothing.

“You're not going to sew yourself up are you?”

“It would not be the first time I’ve had to do so.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

He met Will’s eyes, his expression unbearably fond. “You already have, your presence alone has dulled the ache far better than any numbing agent. Though, it might help speed the process if you could sterilize and thread the needle.”

He did as he was told, happy to be making himself useful, he couldn’t help the warmth that spread through his chest at Hannibal’s words though. The knot he used was similar to the ones he tied his flies with.

Hannibal snapped on a pair of blue latex gloves and began to pass the needle back and forth in his own skin. His movements were quick, practiced, and efficient, Will was enraptured. He was reminded of his fantasy of Hannibal sewing him shut just so that his touch would linger on him. It was less of a desperate need now that Hannibal touched him sweetly of his own volition, but he couldn't help but wonder. Would he keep his doctored professionalism when he was sewing Will up? Or would he draw it out- bask in the sensuality?

The gash was sewed and dressed in under ten minutes, it really was a mark of his experience. He pondered if it stemmed more from his time sewing up other people or himself, he *had* claimed this wasn't the first time. Likely, it was a mix of both.

He began to reach for more bandaging, this time for his arm, when Will gently stopped him.

"At least let me do this for you. I'm not entirely useless." For a moment, he thought Hannibal might protest, but he acquiesced after barely a second's hesitation. Will gestured towards his dress shirt, lightly flecked with blood. "It might be easier if we got this off."

"Will-" He stopped Hannibal's protest with a soft hand on his chest. He knew what he was about to say, Will had felt a similar trepidation ever since the foreboding sigil on his chest had manifested as well, but here his fears were unfounded.

"It's okay, I know." Tension leaked from Hannibal's frame and he allowed Will to first undo the buttons on his cuffs and then the ones holding the shirt in place. It was slow going, he did his best not to jostle the wound on his left arm and be wary of any bruises that might be hidden under the pressed cloth.

His hope hadn't been misplaced, he'd recognized the little black points as the tines they were. They continued down his chest and spread to cover his entire upper torso, just as they had on Will's own body. By the time the stag skull was revealed, he found himself breathless and a little watery-eyed. He'd told Hannibal it was an ugly thing, but now the descriptor couldn't seem further from the truth- it was utterly beautiful. The antlers caressed the planes of muscle and the skull sat snug in the dip in between, he couldn't bring himself to fault the size and macabre design. Not when it seemed so entirely natural adorning Hannibal's body.

He gingerly touched it, followed an antler all the way up Hannibal's neck. The flesh was soft yet taut beneath, crafted from years of luxury along with must be an impressive workout regime- one that likely saved his life today. His ministrations drew a full-body shiver from the man underneath.

"Will…" His name came out in a sigh.

"Yes?" He breathed out the word softly, caught in the utter worship that shone in Hannibal's eyes.

"Yours. Show me yours, please."

He swallowed. "You're still injured, we should take care of that first."

“It can wait a few more moments. Let me see you,” Hannibal attempted to command, but his tone was so adoring it came out closer to begging. He relented, how could he not under Hannibal’s undivided attention?

He discarded his flannel and took a deep steadying breath before divesting himself of his high-collared undershirt and resisted the acute urge to hide himself. Hannibal looked enraptured, reverently he reached out to trace the antlers as well, a mirror of Will’s own movements.

“It’s beautiful, Will, *you’re beautiful,* divine and resplendent. You’ve kept me waiting for months.”

“You knew?”

“I had suspicions, but when you said you were marked by the ripper…” Will was a goddamned *idiot.* He’d been so caught up in the elation of finding his soulmate in Hannibal he’d almost forgotten what he’d said only one night ago. To his soulmate's *face* he’d claimed their mark was so ugly, so horrifying that it could only belong to a serial killer.

“I’m sorry, I was so convinced that I was broken, that my mark reflected it that I never let myself consider it could be anyone else. I’ve been so blind, I should’ve known right from the start, you were really the only new person who came into my life.”

“It’s of little importance, we see each other now and that’s all that matters.” He tugged Will into him, he braced his weight on the arms of the chair so as to not further exacerbate his injuries. Hannibal kissed him, gently and resolute- a promise. Will caressed the scabbed-over lip wound with his tongue without breaking the coagulated seal and withdrew. There would be time for this type of exploration later, now he insisted on dressing the rest of the cuts and making sure the man didn’t have a concussion.

Chapter End Notes

whoop finally got to the scene that sparked this fic in the first place ehe

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will prepared them a simple meal under Hannibal's careful instruction. If it wasn't up to the man's standards, he didn't say so.

All in all, Hannibal's injuries could have been a lot worse. Most of the cuts and bruises were predominantly benign, he'd be sore for a few days sure, but that was all. The stab wound would likely scar but it wouldn't impede his movement once he was healed.

He'd donned his flannel once again and produced a bundle of sleep clothes for his injured host. Neither thought it prudent to keep every button fastened though.

"I have a subject of concern I wish to discuss with you, though I am unsure how to breach the issue." Hannibal addressed him only after his kitchen was returned to a state that mostly resembled the perfect order he typically kept it in. Will had tried to keep him in his seat, off the injured leg, but Hannibal was a determined man, especially when it came to his rigid cleaning habits.

"Oh? That sounds serious." He couldn't help the teasing lilt in his tone. Today had been a wild roller coaster of emotions, but all he was left with now in the safety of Hannibal's home, with the man he'd been promised, was affection- tender and giddy.

"It is, but I fear it would be a disservice to you if I kept it to myself any longer. Will, I believe you should get a brain scan."

"...What?" That was *not* the direction he thought the conversation would go.

"I have been reexamining your condition, referencing old patients, consulting colleagues- of course leaving your name out of these discussions- and there's a chance that whatever is plaguing you is physiological in nature rather than psychological."

"So you're saying I might not be crazy? That it's not just stress that's causing everything?"

"I wouldn't say so. I fear that stress has exacerbated a latent pre-existing condition to the point of physical malady. Though you cannot take my suggestion here as fact, I'd like to have something more substantial before I give a diagnosis, hence the brain scan."

"What do you think it is?" He tried not to let hope leak into his tone, he could have a tumor or brain cancer, but there was a possibility that he wasn't just *insane* . It was a bit sobering that apparently no one else had picked up on it, that his decline was in character enough that everyone else assumed that it was a definite possibility that he'd just gone off the deep end.

"As I said, I'd like to see physical evidence before I give a diagnosis, but off the records, I'd say encephalitis." If Hannibal was right, all that was plaguing him was a brain infection. He

wasn't a medical professional by any means, but infections could almost all be treated with the right set of antibiotics, this might not even cause long-term damage.

"How confident are you?"

"I won't give you a number, but I'm cautiously optimistic. The only physical option other than an infection would be a tumor, and I doubt you'd still be standing here right now if that had been what was plaguing you as long as this had."

"So it's either encephalitis or stress. Otherwise I'd be dead, right?"

"In not so simple terms, yes. Though I do believe stress has worsened the infection, if it's there in the first place. Bacteria cannot create the visions you see, they cannot conjure pictures of blood, bone, and monsters. I still stand by my original assessment Will, even if I failed to place your underlying condition."

"My symptoms wouldn't have been this bad if I hadn't started helping Jack, right?"

"I doubt it, likely it would have been months, if not years before it spread far enough to make you rise from your bed at night."

There was truth to Hannibal's words, stress compromises the immune system, his would be shot to shit even if he wasn't dealing with a head on fire.

Encephalitis was a serious condition, it could lead to death in severe cases. Even so, all he felt at the moment were floods of relief and gratitude. Will was a man who'd been plagued by a slew of mental problems his whole life, no practitioner settled on a diagnosis, so they just kept piling them on top of eachother. No one would be surprised about his rapid decline from sanity, no one would even think to look for something physically wrong, not even him.

If Hannibal hadn't come into his life, if he didn't care enough to try and then try *again* to help him…he didn't want to think where he'd be.

He told his partner as much, Hannibal's responding smile was small, a pained little twitch that didn't reach his eyes.

"I should have seen it sooner. You've been suffering."

"How were you supposed to know? You have to admit I was the perfect target for it to remain unnoticed."

"Even so, you may not have been my patient officially, but I was still trusted to look after your mind."

"You didn't plant the infection, Hannibal. And we're taking care of it now, right? Weren't you the one who said it's a fool's errand to worry about what we cannot change? There's nothing more you can do for the night, so I suggest we leave concern for tomorrow." He crossed the room to invade Hannibal's space. He drew the doctor from his seat, weary to not bump the bandage on his wrist.

“And what would you have us do instead?”

“Currently, I’d very much enjoy it if you took me to bed.” Perhaps it wasn’t the right time, what with the injuries and revelations, but Will was craving skinship, in any variety Hannibal offered. He had a feeling it was reciprocated, the day had been harrowing for both of them.

“I believe that can be arranged.”

They made their way to Hannibal’s master bedroom, it appeared more foreboding in the low-light of evening rather than the soft brightness of morning, but the ambiance seemed to fit the space better. Dark images were conjured here, not necessarily bad ones, just ones that fell on a more shaded palette. Will preferred those images anyways, nothing in his life, not even the happiest moments, were colored brightly, and the darkness of Hannibal’s room felt more akin to a comforting weighted blanket. He was trapped in the most positive sense, he felt there was no way he could wake from here and be wandering miles down the road, and he wouldn’t have to lock himself in and freeze the key.

“Should I offer my guest room?”

“If you would like, but I’d much rather sleep here.”

“Then I won’t do you the disservice.

This wasn’t how he imagined spending his first night in Hannibal’s bed, but considering his unconscious self had already taken that first, he didn’t feel so bad about this not being the perfect picturesque scenario. He was almost relieved, he already knew how natural it felt to sleep next to the man, so his performance anxiety wouldn’t keep him up half the night.

Hannibal reclined on the bed, eyes half-lidded, his posture open and inviting. He wore the same expression he had the other night Will stayed over.

Logically, he knew he should decline, Hannibal was still injured and he didn’t want to risk pulling a stitch. He shivered at the thought, the free flow of Hannibal’s blood on their intertwined bodies. It should have horrified him, one of those intrusive thoughts that you recognize and discard. Instead, he only wanted to add his own to the mix. Budge hadn’t torn through the skin on his hand when he attempted to strangle him with piano wire, but it was weakened enough that a tear would be easy to facilitate with a minimal amount of force.

“Are you having reservations?” Hannibal’s voice was less concerned and more teasing. It was only then he realized he’d been standing in the doorway contemplating for the last few minutes. Shit, he was already screwing this up.

“No just, taking it all in. This is the first time I remember entering your room.”

“I can’t imagine it's that intimidating. You seemed quite comfortable last time you were here.” Hannibal started to worry the cut on his lip. It wasn’t a nervous gesture, every movement the man made had intention. His current intention became clear as soon as the cut began to sluggishly bleed. He caught a wayward red droplet on his tongue and the vine that rooted Will in place shriveled and died under the heat in his gut.

He was on the other man before his tongue had fully retreated. With little caution or elegance he brought their mouths together, desperate for that coppery taste of his partner. He'd never been this way with previous lovers, but Hannibal not only fostered this strange need to *consume,* he nurtured it. Pollinated it like a flowering bud. None too gently, he pulled Will closer, on top of him, and dug his nails into the bare flesh he could reach from Will's parted flannel.

He gripped Hannibal's skin in turn. His fingers came down hard on a rough patch of skin- a bruise he hadn't noticed- and Hannibal gasped into his mouth. Reluctantly, he withdrew; they shouldn't be doing this, not if they were going to rapidly devolve into something violent while Hannibal was still injured.

"We should stop."

"Is that what you want?"

"No, but you're still recovering. You were attacked just a few hours ago Hannibal, I don't want to hurt you." That was a lie, hopefully one he couldn't read in Will's eyes. He didn't want to hurt him the way Budge did, but that didn't mean he didn't want to hurt him in other ways. He wanted to make marks and suck bruises, leave reminders of himself, the urge hadn't abated with the presence of their soulmark. He fantasized about merging their bodies, splitting both their ribs and weaving them together so they'd fuse and Will wouldn't have to feel that cold bite of loneliness ever again. It was impractical though, so he settled for blood, at least then he could imagine he could feel Hannibal's life fueling his cells.

"What if I don't mind? What if I want you to hurt me?" Will shivered, again Hannibal seemed to read his mind and pull every dark urge out and serve it to him.

"That doesn't seem very fair. Shouldn't this be more about pleasure than pain?"

"We've already established in our previous encounter that our tastes run outside convention. I see no issue with you exploiting my current state. I quite enjoy your punishments, and I'd much rather be sore because of you rather than the man that attacked me. As for fairness, you need only ask if you desire pain as well. Is that what you want, Will? For me to punish you as you punish me?"

"I don't want it to be a punishment."

"So what do you want it to be?"

"Merging, a consumption." Hannibal's gaze flashed to something even more heavy, he felt its presence on him like a physical limb. "I want tomorrow to come and have evidence I can touch to remind me that this was real, that this happened and know that somewhere inside of my blood and cells there's still evidence of you." He looked at Will like a man who'd just found religion, an enraptured devotion danced across his dark eyes. "What about you?"

"I want elevation. I want to dig into your back muscle until I can draw out the pristine feathers I know are trapped under the sinew. I want to discover every color our skin can turn and create a masterpiece with our flesh. I want to taste it, I want to taste *you.* " The noise that

drew from Will’s throat could only be described as a whine, a desperate thing born from acute desire. He wasn’t even sure if the gore that spilled from their mouths counted as dirty talk, but it worked a hell of a lot better than anything he’d attempted in his previous encounters, the few he had.

He hadn't let go of the firm flesh beneath his palms. As he dug further into the bruise he sucked Hannibal’s bleeding lip into his mouth. Gently, he agitated both the cut and the bruise, leaving them larger than they started. It felt like he was covering them, soothing the injury with a pain that was far more sweet.

Hannibal let his knees drop to either side of Will’s hips so he could crush him in closer.

His sleep clothes were made of silk, because of course they were. Clearly quite expensive too, he probably wouldn’t appreciate it if Will ripped a few buttons loose in his haste to expose more of the man’s skin. It was with great control that he didn't realize he possessed at the moment, that he allowed the slow reveal, but it was so much sweeter for the effort. Each inch revealed more purple blotches, he'd weathered far more blows than Will anticipated.

He pressed down on each just to feel the blemished skin, just to hear the hisses and grunts that came from the man underneath. When he started to withdraw Hannibal grabbed his hand and pressed it even further into his skin. It stung where his nails dug into the grooves left by the piano wire.

“Do it. Make me bleed,” Will panted. The skin parted easily under the pressure of Hannibal’s fingers and a steady trickle dripped into the webbing and onto his fingertips.

He used the blood like an ink pen, turned the bruises into markers for a macabre game of connect-the-dots. The stark red lines criss-crossed his chest, streaking across the broad soulmark. It was vaguely reminiscent of cheap wedding streamers thrown into the trees at an outdoor reception, though those typically didn't come in red.

The look on Hannibal's face halted his ministrations. It was starving and hypnotic, his jaw muscle twitched with the self-restraint he was desperately holding onto. Will wanted to snap it like a twig, to let whatever desire he was holding back be exposed to broad light.

His expressions were much easier to read when he was hovering on the edge like this, so Will allowed a more intentional empathetic connection. Maybe he’d be able to draw out whatever Hannibal was tamping down.

He pressed his hands into Hannibal’s shoulders and maintained eye contact, weighty and constant, and encouraged his emotions to become Will’s own.

The first thing he noticed wasn’t a feeling though, it was an ache in his jaw. It sat below his molars where his teeth were clamped firmly shut. He was salivating too, the central taste buds on his tongue tingled.

There was his answer. Hannibal had already said he wanted to *taste* him, he was waiting for Will’s permission to take the first bite.

“Open your mouth.” His lips parted with an eager acceptance, Will eased his bleeding fingers inside without much elegance. “Bite.” He didn’t hesitate. His teeth clenched along with his hands around Will’s hips.

Those strangely elongated canines reared their heads once again as they precisely found the spot where skin had been worried to the point of breaking. Just as Will had done to his cuts and bruises, he teased the flesh until the abrasion was slightly larger and withdrew with one final lap of the spilled blood.

Will dove to kiss him. He knew it wouldn’t actually taste any different than his own blood, but that didn’t really matter as he swore he could sense the elevated taste that their combined blood made. It was complimentary, the perfect pairing of wine and supper.

Hannibal moved his attention to Will’s chest, a reciprocal action, though he seemed to have his own agenda. With an irritated almost-growl that drew a small laugh from Will, he was finally divested of his flannel, though at that point he was basically only wearing the sleeves.

He started at the pair of smallest tines, directly over the head of the stag. His mouth lavished attention to the tip of each in turn, leaving a red soon-to-be purple mark at the points’ sharp apex.

Slowly, he worked his way outwards, leaving a mark on each prong. There were quite a few, they were closer to branches than a realistic set of antlers.

He couldn't help the breathy moans that tumbled loosely from his lips each time Hannibal's teeth clamped down on his flesh. By then he was hard and aching and the fabric of his jeans felt far too restrictive, but he'd sooner die before he dislodged Hannibal's mouth.

He finished with the high prongs along his jugular. It was only then, with his chest splayed with color, that he saw the image Hannibal was trying to create. The sucked bite marks were reminiscent of the blooms from a fruit tree; they were flowering branches that sprouted from the skull on his sternum.

There were a handful of metaphors he could make and meanings to draw, and he was sure that was what Hannibal intended, but at the moment he took pleasure in the simple physical sensation the act had drawn. He'd have time for more complicated thoughts tomorrow when he wasn't about to finish in his work jeans.

He drew Hannibal's lips back to his own. His tight grip on Will’s hips didn't abate, if anything it grew even more forceful as Will began to make little bucking motions involuntarily.

One of his hands snaked under the fabric and cupped him through his underwear. He was so sensitive at the moment, this barest contact was a sweet torture. A whine burst from his throat, high-pitched and embarrassing. He’d come from feather light touches before he even divested himself of his pants at this rate.

He ground hard against Hannibal’s hand, seeking contact that would finally push him over the edge. His fingers were at odd angles trying to work around the clothing that still separated

them. It was his frustration that finally got him to detach himself from the doctor's skilled lips and hands.

Without any teasing, he shed his jeans and tossed them to a corner of the room carelessly. Only one of his socks came off in the rush, but he was too wound up to care about shedding the other.

Hannibal was carefully folding his sleep pants when Will returned his brief lapse of attention. The seconds he took to align the creases might as well have been hours. He almost ripped the garment from his hands when he caught the teasing smirk on Hannibal's lips.

The bastard was doing this on purpose.

He did grab the offensive clothing then and flung it away as if it stung him. Hannibal only chuckled and drew Will right back into his spot between his spread legs.

Neither wasted time on more teasing foreplay. The slight sojourn had barely been long enough to call him back from the edge, but he knew he wouldn't last.

Hannibal's uninjured hand skipped down his side until it regained its spot at the junction between pelvis and thigh. It was so close to where Will wanted him, he stuttered out a broken *"Please"* that didn't go unanswered.

His firm hand encircled him, just enough to be tight, a solid pressure, without being choking and restrictive. He gyrated his hips, he was so *close.* It had been years since he'd been intimate with anyone, he was oversensitive and overwhelmed from emotions that felt too big for his skull.

He didn't push Will away. Not once during their acquaintance had he so much as flinched when Will showed him his morbid underbelly. Every time he spilled truth or came at the man teeth-first, he simply matched him head on. And still he *cared,* he met Will with violence and gentle concern in equal measure.

His devotion was physically felt, it was as tangible a feeling as the hand currently pumping him in long even strokes.

He couldn't have lasted longer than a minute, he was surprised it even took that.

White streaks intermingled with the blood still adorning Hannibal's chest. He came down from his high slowly, slumping forward into the mess they made. It was only when he felt Hannibal's own length against his stomach that he regained some of his senses.

He trailed his hand in between them, past the patch of hair leading to his cock. Will didn't have much to compare it to, other than himself, but just from the feeling he could tell Hannibal wasn't a small man. He was weighty in his palm, he wanted it inside him. Another way to consume.

His own spent cock gave a pitiful jump at the thought. It wouldn't happen tonight but it still streaked across his eyes.

He began to give gentle strokes, a little unsure of what he was doing. Sex was never a priority for him, his experience overall was meagre, not to mention his nonexistent encounters with men. He couldn't even draw ideas from self-gratification, it was infrequent and mostly uncomfortable.

Hannibal's hand clasped over his own. He began to move them in tandem as he kept their lips and upper bodies conjoined. He urged Will to take a tighter grip, to move quicker. Small grunts and gasps were his reward, bestowed right into his waiting mouth.

With a final jerk, he came into Will's palm. They both collapsed back onto the sullied bed sheets as the adrenaline worked its way from their systems.

Will didn't say anything, he didn't want to disrupt the overarching sense of calm satisfaction that permeated the air, but he made sure to find Hannibal's eyes. From this close, the flecks of maroon seemed to take up the entire thin strip of iris. Hannibal brought Will's blood and release coated hand to his lips and began cleaning each dip and crevice with his tongue.

If he was younger it might have persuaded him to go another round. As it was, he still felt his cock twitch painfully, but he felt no desire to do anything else except watch the muscle work its way around his fingers.

He kissed him sweetly when he finished cleaning the digit and reluctantly pulled away. It was easy enough to find a washcloth in the adjoining bathroom and wipe the two of them down. As Will worked he noticed both their spotted chests, they were almost matching with the amount of blood and bruises that colored their skin.

Strangely, he didn't feel guilty anymore. Hannibal wanted this, and honestly Will thought the picture they painted was beautiful. He quickly completed his task and wiggled his way under the covers.

Will drew himself close in Hannibal's caging embrace, sated and mostly clean. His breath hadn't started to even yet, now was the time to ask the question that had been rattling around his skull before he lost his nerve.

"How did it feel to take a life?" *Are you messed up like me?*

He took a long moment to respond, but his voice was steady and clear. Not the small whisper he answered Jack with earlier. "Righteous. Powerful."

Will clenched the arm that was slung across his waist in reverence. *Not alone, not alone* , his brain chanted. Hannibal was a good man, people flocked towards him like animals to a watering hole, and he had the same thoughts Will did. It felt liberating.

"You don't feel guilty?" His tone was free of any accusation, more gentle than anything else.

"No, I don't. He attempted to kill me and, more importantly, I believed he had killed you. I can see no fault in my actions."

If Budge had not attacked Hannibal and they still crossed paths, would Hannibal have attempted to kill him anyway? Probably not, but from the conviction in his tone and eyes, Will wasn't so sure.

It almost seemed like he had killed him for Will, vengeance at the realization his partner had been stolen. His arousal from their encounter had abated by now, but that sent heat pooling south that he really didn't want to think about.

No one had ever killed for him before. It gave him that same guilty lack-of-guilt that killing Hobbs did. He couldn't even claim that this was actually done in his name, it was self-defense, plain and simple. Hannibal had only been fueled with the emotions of a lover scorned. Will tried to shake off the odd disappointment at that, he shouldn't want someone to kill for him. No matter the heady shot of power that flooded his neural pathways, no matter the pleasure at the utter devotion of the act.

"I can't either, but it worries me that I can't."

"In the eyes of the law, both you and I are justified, but convention can only allow us so far, Will. A man cannot be tried for his emotions surrounding his actions, so why let them fester into worry and fear? We have both killed now, is it not more freeing to only see the good in the action now that it cannot be undone?"

"It's murder, only killers feel good when they kill."

"That's not true, you're too smart to believe it. Jack wants to kill the Chesapeake Ripper, it would feel good to him. Do you see Jack as a killer? He's certainly shot and killed bad men before, just as you have."

"Jack's not a killer, but I understand your point. It's just not that easy to turn off your emotions, to only take the good and discard the bad."

"It isn't no, but it comes with practice."

"Is that what you want me to do now? 'Practice' turning off my emotions?"

"Perhaps, it would certainly help you sleep. You are kept up almost as often with your anxious waking thoughts as your restless sleeping ones. If you're comfortable now, with me, then try to think of it deeply. Let it through you, wade through the whole stream of the event and keep only the twigs and leaves that pass by that carry pleasant thought. Everything else will pass in the undertow, to be examined at another time when they can't disrupt the safety of our bed."

Our bed, as if they'd been together for years. Hannibal's words slipped through him like they had, he wondered if it was more because of his therapeutic training or his status as Will's soulmate that his words were so appealing. He had a hunch that it was neither, his solid, safe personality was simply one that drew Will like a moth to a flame, or perhaps a shark to blood.

"I can try, though I don't know if I'll be successful. Empathy disorder and all that."

“I would not ask that you lose your empathy, it is intrinsic to you and I could not stand for any part of you dulled or repressed. What I desire is for you to be able wield that empathy however you please, not for it to wield you. Right now though, it's late, and what I want is for you to be able to sleep and ward off any bad dreams that might try to appear.” Will turned away from his gaze, he could see the flecks of red that showed in his eyes like little pin pricks even in the lowlight. His head rested on the arm below him and he pulled himself even closer to his chest. They intertwined their legs and for once, Will felt close enough.

He tried what Hannibal asked. Sleepy thoughts trickled through him and when they started to turn dark and bloody, he only allowed the positive to pierce the comfortable space Hannibal had crafted for him. Power, righteousness, beauty, quiet- all the little things that he felt guilty for enjoying when he encountered death, he allowed, but everything else slipped through him and down the stream as if he were a ghost.

It was peaceful, he was asleep within minutes.

Chapter End Notes

yall have no idea how close i was to writing "its either encephalitis or stress. nerf or nothin."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He knew the United States healthcare system wasn't this efficient. Hannibal must have pulled a few strings to get him here on such short notice.

He'd looked up the doctor he was seeing today, not that he didn't trust Hannibal's recommendation, but he'd been in and out of the system for years before he met the man, and it's better to be safe than sorry.

Donald Sutcliffe, M.D., was what the business card Hannibal handed him said. He was a brain surgeon, top of his field and apparently one of Hannibal's buddies from his time in medical school.

His waiting room certainly spoke of a sought-after professional, it was large enough for multiple patients and their families, but at the moment, Will was the only one occupying. He wondered how Hannibal swung that one, 2:00 pm on a Monday wasn't exactly dead hours for a doctor's office.

"Will, we're ready for you." Hannibal poked his head out of the room where he'd watched him discuss whatever it was with his med school friend. He knew they were probably talking about his brain and symptoms, but he hadn't really wanted to hear them go over the little tortures he already experienced. It was nerve-wracking enough to be in this building in the first place.

He'd pictured having to strip down to a medical gown, but Hannibal had told him this morning he wouldn't have to as long as he didn't wear anything that contained metal. His jeans and slacks were out of the question then, but he had a few pairs of grease-stained sweats that worked well enough. They made him feel out of place in the pristine office, but at least the feeling was familiar, almost comforting. He felt it every time he was in Hannibal's home.

He had a headache when he woke that morning and it hadn't abated. The bright lights of the room and the whirring of the machine emphasized it acutely. He wanted to reach for his aspirin but he'd already taken at least six pills today.

The magnetic pulse of the MRI turned the pain into a sharp point lancing through his skull. He bit back an involuntary cry with a wince and did his best to keep his head still. He fisted the fabric of his sweats and pulled at the skin of his thigh to try to keep himself distracted.

It was over without his head bursting open, which felt like a sure possibility in those last couple minutes. Hannibal brought him into the attached examination room to see the scans they'd taken.

Sutcliffe pointed to some bulging yellow areas on the screen that highlighted parts of his brain. He didn't have the experience to say exactly what was wrong, but even to a layman it didn't look right. "You have anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. It's a brain infection, the swelling is what's causing all the headaches."

He used the full title to impress, the doctor was used to being the smartest person in the room. To him, Will was just another layman that rotated through his doors, this was just an opportunity to impress a man he actually respected.

Under Hannibal's care, he's almost forgotten what it felt like to be looked at with medical curiosity. That was how Sutcliffe saw him at the moment. His disdain for the doctor didn't shadow his relief though, his condition was entirely treatable, Hannibal had been right, of course.

"I recommend you be hospitalized for a few days, preferably a week, as we administer the antibiotics. I'll also prescribe steroids to help reduce swelling."

He grunted in acknowledgment, his head still hurt like a bitch.

As much as he didn't want an extended stay in a hospital, he wanted this dealt with as soon as possible. He was becoming more and more of a danger to himself and he couldn't remember the last time he didn't have a migraine. His waking thoughts were almost as jumbled as his unconscious ones.

"Great, I'll grab one of the nurses and have them set up a room for you in B-wing." With that, he swept out of the room, confident and sure-footed. Will hated him a little, he clearly knew what he was doing, but his arrogance was palpable. Sutcliffe cared very little for human life, he just found satisfaction in treating the human body like a puzzle to be solved, though, Will had to concede, his disdain was a bit hypocritical. How could a person hate another for not valuing life when he himself had taken one and enjoyed doing so?

Hannibal interrupted his thoughts with a warm hand covering his own.

"How are you feeling?"

"Head hurts. Your friend's an ass."

"Acquaintance, and I have to agree. He is quite respected in his field though, you'll receive the best care the area has to offer."

"He said they want me hospitalized, what am I going to do about my classes? And Jack?"

"I believe you said Alana has covered your classes in the past, there is no need to lie about your extended stay. I will speak with Jack, this is not the first time I've done so on your behalf." And didn't that sting. Hannibal had been taking care of him for long enough now that it was becoming routine. When Will tried to reciprocate, bandage his wounds and send him to bed, he ended up breaking more skin and creating more bruises.

“Will, I don’t want you feeling guilty that I’m here.” He tried to even out the grimace that had appeared on his face, but he wasn’t fast enough, Hannibal had already detected his discomfort. The man could read him like a book, it was a fruitless endeavor to try to hide from him.

“It doesn’t feel right, aren’t partnerships supposed to be equal? This whole time it's just been you taking care of me.”

“I’d say your care was certainly felt the other night.” A sly grin appeared on the doctor’s face, it was boyish, charming, and made him appear far younger than middle aged. He rubbed his thumb along Will’s palm in a circular pattern that soothed Will’s frayed nerves.

“I wouldn't call that ‘care’, if anything I made your injuries worse.”

“I appreciated it all the same. Regardless, I can find no fault in our dynamic. I was introduced to you to be your stability, not the other way around, it shall take time for us to define and embody our new roles. In the meanwhile, I still would like to do whatever I can to make your life easier, would you deny me that?”

“I can’t, I don’t want to. Everything’s easier with you around, I just wish I could make your life easier as well, but that’s not going to happen for at least a few weeks now while I’m stuck here or put on forced bedrest.”

“You already do. I cannot say how painfully bored I was before you came into my life, Will. I doubt I was more than six months away from moving to somewhere in Europe or northern Asia just for a change in scenery.” He flipped his hand in Hannibal's grip to interlace their fingers.

“I'm glad you didn't-” It was then that a nurse poked his head in.

“Mr. William Graham? We have your room ready.” He almost let go of Hannibal’s hand, but he realized he didn’t have to. Here, in this moment, no one would see him as something wicked, plagued with thoughts of death and murder. He was simply a scared, ill man seeking the comfort of his partner. No one could fault him, it was one of the most normal instances seen in hospitals.

Hannibal squeezed his hand and didn’t move to let go.

He was led to a private room with a window that looked over the parking lot. There were already IV bags on hooks next to the white hospital bed with railings halfway down its side. They reminded him of a crib, or more aptly, a cage.

Sutcliffe was already inside, writing something down on a clipboard that looked like it hung on the edge of the bed. At Will’s arrival, he produced a bottle of acetaminophen that he handed to Hannibal instead. He looked at their joined hands with pointed confusion.

“For the fever. I’ll order the steroids and antibiotics now. Do you have any questions Mr. Graham?” He didn’t wait long enough for Will to answer. “Good, the nurse will be back in a few minutes to get you on fluids, he’ll also return with your prescription. I trust you can get

him situated in the meantime?" The doctor grimaced as Hannibal handed the full bottle of Tylenol to Will.

"I think we'll manage just fine until the nurse arrives." Hannibal's tone was clipped, short. Not obviously, Sutcliffe was clearly still preening, but Will could tell he was annoyed.

"I'll leave you to it then, I have other appointments to keep. Good day, Dr. Lecter." He waited half a beat for a response from Hannibal that didn't come, and darted out of the room after a final befuddled glare shot at their intertwined fingers.

Reluctantly, Will released his sweaty grip to shake a few pills into his palm. He didn't ask for a cup of water, but Hannibal produced one anyway.

"I wonder if he's like that with all his patients. It's rather unbecoming."

"I think he's just more focused on impressing you than anything else. Guessing you were always just a step ahead in the classes you took together, bet he's glad you don't work in surgery anymore so you can't show him up."

"Perhaps, but healthy competition in schooling breeds more qualified professionals. I would have hoped he saw us more as colleagues at this point. It still does not excuse him treating you as if you have no agency. Terribly rude."

Will smiled and sat on the bed, it was stiff and lumpy. His back would certainly be worse for wear after his extended stay.

"It doesn't really matter as long as his prescription fixes me, right? And I'm used to it, seen plenty of his kind over the years."

"You shouldn't have had to. Your mind is not something that should be studied under a microscope." He drew Hannibal to stand between his legs and grasped both of his hands. They weren't rough and calloused like his own, but they were still working hands. He could feel the minute shift of tiny developed muscles that spoke of years practicing fine motor control.

"Don't act like you weren't writing papers in your head when Jack introduced us. You're a psychiatrist, I bet you couldn't help it."

"When we met, I can honestly say that I was simply thrilled that Jack brought me such an exquisite creature. You intrigued me as a person more than anything else." Will didn't let go of his hands as they moved to caress his cheeks.

"That can't be true. You hate rude people, I'm pretty sure I stormed off before we spoke for a minute."

"I find myself making all sorts of exceptions when you're involved. You compromise me, Will, and I find myself caring about that fact less and less."

He wasn't sure which one of them leaned in first, but the kiss was sweet and reassuring. He held Hannibal's wrists tight as they lingered in the shared space, simply breathing in each

other's carbon dioxide. With Hannibal bent over him like this, he could forget there was a world outside the man holding his face, everything narrowed down to the tender warmth of him.

A light cough came from behind the man currently flooding his vision. Ah, the nurse must be back.

Hannibal pulled back gently and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead before he stepped away. It brought heat to Will's cheeks that had nothing to do with his fever.

"I, um," The nurse took a second to recompose himself. "Dr. Sutcliffe ordered some prescriptions and fluids. I'm here to hook you up to the IV and go over your medications." This one actually addressed Will. Hannibal certainly gave off a professional air, but after the little display the nurse walked into, there was no way he'd believe Hannibal his caretaker.

He went over the main treatment, which consisted of a course of steroids and antibiotics, plus a high concentration of over the counter fever medication. If all went well, they would only need to keep him in observation for a week, then he'd be released to finish the course over a few days of bedrest. Of course with a qualified physician to check in on him. Hannibal enthusiastically volunteered, though it was really kind of a given at that point.

It seemed so simple. He'd been burning alive for months, the hallucinations became so frequent he began to expect them. And it would all be over in a week and a half, with no long term side-effects if all went well. He was so relieved he almost felt like crying.

What would he have done if Hannibal hadn't picked up on it? He might not have if he hadn't been a doctor before he got his psychiatry license, he wasn't brought in to be Will's physician after all.

The nurse left after he got Will attached to the fluids and repeated the medication schedule to him twice. One pill of the antibiotics, three times a day, after eating. Steroids once a day, in the morning with breakfast. Acetaminophen and a mild sedative as necessary. He'd start feeling better as early as tomorrow.

Hannibal fussed with the pillows and blinds as soon as the room was devoid of other company. He didn't seem perturbed by Will's teasing.

"I'm as comfortable as I'm going to get in a hospital bed, calm down."

"There must be something I can do."

"Not at the moment. Pills and bedrest are what the doctor ordered, and I don't think you can do that for me."

"Are you sure there is nothing I can provide?"

Like an echo of their first night together, Will replied. "I can think of one thing." Their lips joined once more, a chaste union that had Hannibal hovering precariously over his bedside so as to not disrupt the IV.

“I think I should call Alana, now that I know how long I’m not gonna be able to teach.”

“Alright, then I’ll call Jack.” He pressed his lips to Will’s fingers with an expression so fond, so reverent, he physically ached. No one ever looked at him the way Hannibal did, equal measures of heat, devotion, care, and something beautifully dark. It was intoxicating, but also extremely distracting at the moment.

He shoved him away with a snort. “You can’t do that if you’re hanging off me like a lemur. Give me the room for a minute, I’ll be fine.”

“As you wish,” He replied with a teasing half-nod half-bow and left the sterile cream colored room.

Hopefully Alana wasn’t with a patient or lecturing at the moment, it was mid afternoon, so it could go either way.

“Hello, Dr. Bloom speaking.” He wasn’t sent to voicemail, so hopefully she had a minute.

“Hey Alana, are you busy?”

“Will? No I’m not, are you alright?”

“I will be. I know this is last minute, but would you be able to cover my classes for the rest of the week? And probably a little next week too, at least until Wednesday.” He felt bad asking her, especially after their last interaction, but he didn’t really have anyone else he could turn to.

“Of course, but is something going on? Is Jack giving you overtime again?”

“Not exactly, I’m in the hospital,” He mumbled his words, half hoping she didn’t hear him.

“The hospital?” Shit, she did hear him. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“Like I said, I will be. Hannibal realized that I might have something…physical going on with my brain, so he recommended I get an MRI. They found exactly what he thought they might.”

“What was it? Are you going to be alright?”

“Brain infection, and I should be. No more hearing animals in my chimney.”

“That’s good to hear, I will admit I was worried.” Her relief was palpable, she spoke like she was smiling. “Should I ask about…?”

“No. I, um, I was wrong. I’m not gonna say much more, I was just wrong.”

“Alright, I won’t ask then. But I’m glad, you’re a good man Will, you’ll find someone who’s good for you too.” He could tell she meant her words to be reassuring, but he couldn’t help but grimace, he was glad she wasn’t here at the moment to see his face. His personality

wouldn’t change, he’d had these dark thoughts since he was old enough to conceive of them. The only thing his hospital visit would fix would be their physical effects on him.

“Yeah, I suppose.” He almost wanted to tell her about Hannibal, that he’d found someone, he wasn’t still looking for a person that would prove he was a ‘good man.’ But it felt wrong to parade their bond around where people could look at them with scrutiny. He didn’t want to keep it secret, and he certainly wasn’t ashamed of Hannibal, but this was something private, between just them. Everyone else could draw their own conclusions, it wasn’t his problem.

“You’re probably tired, I’ll let you rest.”

“Thanks Alana, I’ll see you soon.”

“See you, I hope your recovery goes smoothly. Keep me updated okay?”

“I will,” He conceded. The call disconnected with a few signature beeps and the room fell into a quiet that wasn’t stifling for once.

———

The clack of heels on the tile for once, didn’t sound like the clop of hooves. Their steady staccato woke him from a sleep that was surprisingly deep and comfortable. Likely due to the medication, the ample bedding Hannibal brought, and the man himself pressed against Will’s side in the cramped space.

He’d shed his peacoat and loafers after Will convinced him to share the small hospital mattress. He'd tried to convince him that he'd be fine for the night, that Hannibal should go home, get a good night's rest, but he wasn't having it.

He stirred right as the clack of heels came to a halt at the door to Will’s room.

A gentle knock sounded just as Alana pushed her way in. “Will, are you awa- oh, hello Hannibal.”

“Good morning, Alana.” Hannibal gracefully swung his legs from the mattress and fussed with the pillows and blankets disturbed by his absence. “What brings you to visit dear Will so early?”

He could see a slew of emotions play across her face. Confusion was the largest component, the scene she walked into certainly didn’t look platonic. There were also traces of betrayal, surprise, understanding, and a fair bit of awkwardness. He could certainly empathize, from her perspective this had come out of nowhere and would seem extremely unprofessional and inappropriate on Hannibal’s end.

Her attempts at rationalization were obvious. She was a smart woman though, she wouldn’t discard information right in front of her. Her eyes narrowed on a purpling suck bruise that sat high on Will’s neck. He couldn’t be bothered to try to feel shame about it.

Hannibal acted like he couldn’t even see the conflict on her face, he just smoothed out his fringe and settled in the chair he pulled up close to the bed.

“I figured he could use some company this morning, but I can see you’ve already got that covered.” She shot him a pointed look, Hannibal just seemed amused, though he was hiding it under careful neutrality. “Hannibal, could I speak to you for a moment?”

“Alana, wait.” As fun as it was to watch the conflict on her face, he didn’t actually want her to chew out Hannibal in the middle of a hospital. “It’s alright I promise.”

He could only reach so far with the IV still connected to him, but Hannibal met him halfway when he realized Will’s intention.

He pulled Hannibal’s loose collar aside to reveal the dark pointed tips in an action similar to the last time he’d seen Alana.

“See? All good. And I was never his patient anyways.”

“Oh, um.” He could tell she was thrown. She’d been gearing up for a full-fledged lecture, but now all that built up energy had nowhere to go. She recovered quickly though. “Congratulations then. I imagine it was rather unexpected?”

Will released him but kept a hold on his hand. He wanted the contact and there wasn’t a reason to deny himself it when Alana knew the truth.

“It was, though perhaps not as unexpected as one might imagine,” Hannibal replied.

She seemed dumbfounded, though she was making a valiant effort to keep it from her face. Will wasn’t positive why no one thought they could be suited for each other. Sure, they had some major differences- wardrobe, hobbies, and general neatness were some of the more obvious. But they were remarkably similar once one saw past surface level, Will wasn’t sure how he didn’t see it sooner than he did.

Hannibal may give off the impression of a social butterfly, but really he was just as reserved as Will was, he just expressed it differently. They had the same fascination with the darker side of humanity, they were outside the circle. And as much as Will desired to keep this thing between them private and safe, it still stung that apparently no one else could conceive that it would work.

Alana had known Will for months and worked with Hannibal for years, ever since she was in grad school, and she still was looking at them with a subtle disbelief even when the evidence was directly in front of her.

“How long…?”

“Not long. We um, just figured things out before I got the brain scan.” Hannibal’s thumb rubbed soothingly on the back of his hand. “Could we not-?”

“Oh yeah, of course. I just have to admit, I am surprised. But if you’re both doing well then I'm happy for you,” She deadpanned, it wasn’t intentional but he noticed. “Anyways, how are you feeling, Will? I was worried when you called.”

“A bit better honestly. Headache’s still there but I feel more tethered. Less ‘brain on fire’ more ‘I haven’t been getting enough sleep lately.’”

“More stable? That’s good to hear.” The smile she gave was wide and genuine. “I brought a few books to keep you occupied but it seems you’ve got that covered too.”

Hannibal had left Will’s room for only an hour yesterday and when he returned he not only produced a full set of bedding, but also books, his tablet, a few changes of clothes, and ceramic tupperware containing chicken soup. Though Will could tell he was minorly affronted that he reduced his fancy stew down to its base description.

“A few more couldn’t hurt. But Alana, I meant to ask…”

“Yes?”

“Have you spoken with Abigail?”

“Not since you called me.”

“Last time she visited me at home, she expressed a desire to see you. I have to imagine she’d like to visit,” Hannibal chimed in.

“I wouldn’t mind if she did.”

“I still don’t believe you should be having this much contact with her. Either of you. It’s not good for her recovery to be constantly reminded of the incident.”

Either Will was getting better at reading Hannibal’s expressions or his apathetic veil was becoming more thin. Likely the former as Alana seemed unable to detect his subtle lip twitch of disdain.

“I’m afraid I must respectfully disagree, especially as I’m in the final process of becoming her legal guardian. She needs support, but she is not a child, Alana. She can choose where she seeks it out.”

She simply sighed, frustration and resignation played clearly across her face. This was an ongoing argument, one that she was losing. “I know I can’t change your mind, or hers, but I still wanted to make my professional opinion known.”

She left shortly after, giving them a parting ‘congratulations’ before she went. He could tell she was reluctant, there were a lot of emotions she was sifting through the entire encounter.

His empathy gave him a glimpse into her mindset. She’d been outraged that Hannibal, a man she both respected and trusted deeply, would seemingly disregard all professionalism and propriety.

Her more guilty thoughts reeked of disappointment that she’d taken the high road in regards to her desires involving Will and, he just realized, also Hannibal himself.

Of course, that was all shadowed by worry for Will's condition and her surprise at the reveal of their matching marks.

She really was happy for them though, it was obvious through the set of her eyes, the relaxing of her shoulders, and the cadence of her voice. Alana was a good person, one who believed in a pure type of love. Her jealousy was less focused on the pair of men themselves, but rather the fact that she desired a connection like theirs despite her level-headed professionalism.

He hoped she found that soon. She deserved more than he could give her anyways.

Hannibal broke him from his reverie with a quick squeeze to his hand.

"I suppose I should go fetch your breakfast now that you're awake. We can't have you late to take your medication."

"You know it won't kill me to eat the hospital food."

"I am not so sure about that. I spied them preparing eggs from a *powder*. "

He couldn't help the snort that escaped. Hannibal looked downright murderous at the thought that powdered eggs be allowed to exist on the same planet as him.

"Don't worry, I shall return shortly. The trip to my kitchen is not so long that I cannot provide you with a proper meal."

"I appreciate it, I really do, but you know you don't have to spend all day with me right? Don't you have patients?"

"I do, but they're all adults reasonable enough to understand that their therapist has obligations outside the job. If you would like to be alone for the moment I will not force my presence, but I have cleared my schedule in order to be at your beck and call until you're released."

"I don't want you to go. I hate hospitals, I miss my dogs, it's easier when you're here."

"In that case, I will leave your side as little as possible, I'll be here as long as you want me." His cheek muscle twitched in what Will learned was self-satisfaction. The egotistical bastard liked to hear how much Will wanted him around. He couldn't find it in him to fault the man, not when he was doing everything in his power to make Will's extended hospital visit as pleasant as possible.

"I'm not sure they'll let you stay as long as I want you to. Visitor hours only last so long and I doubt they'll make an exception multiple days in a row."

"Soulmates have special privileges in these circumstances, darling." He hoped Hannibal couldn't hear his heart flip at the endearment. "And even if they didn't, there isn't a force in heaven or hell that can keep me from your side if you desire my presence."

"You're a sap. Get out of here before a nurse walks in to you reciting sonnets."

With a bow-nod and a laugh that started from his chest, he left Will's room as well.

The medication had helped his symptoms slightly, but he hadn't been on them long enough to drastically feel the effects. No, the light, dancing feeling wasn't caused by his treatment, it was from the man who was currently making an hour round trip just so Will would have a good meal.

Really, who else could it have been but Hannibal? When the mark was little more than a dark smudge, he'd been so worried about finding the person who bore the same blemish.

One of the main reasons for his isolation was his inability to quit reading people. His past partners hadn't appreciated it, which he could understand. It was disconcerting to constantly be around someone who could read your thoughts, and it was exhausting on Will's end.

Hannibal was different. He'd gotten better at reading the doctor's microexpressions, but his mind was still comfortably quiet. Will wasn't subjected to a mindset that was totally separate from his own. He felt like *himself* when Hannibal was around. It was a rare feeling that he coveted considering he often didn't even feel like himself when he was alone.

Trusting Hannibal had gotten him this far, he'd just have to trust him when he said he was getting just as much out of their bond.

Chapter End Notes

updates are gonna come a little more infrequently for the next little bit as i finish this monster out :) prolly closer to every other day or every few days

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few days were slow. Hannibal's presence was both reassuring and constant, it was like having his own personal nurse on hand at all times. The few instances he did leave were to bring him home cooked meals and to take care of Will's pack, at his own vehement insistence.

He took photos and videos of the dogs and even snuck in a small box of Will's fly-tying equipment. Not once did Will feel scrutinized or pitied by the hospital staff. On nearly all of them, Will read something tender and heartwarming whenever they witnessed the lengths Hannibal went to. It was a softer expression than Will was used to receiving, but he could understand the perspective of an outsider looking in. Hannibal's dedication must seem sweet, and honestly, it was.

Perhaps, just this once he could let himself be what others assumed. For now, he could simply be a man recovering from a very serious brain infection under the steadfast care of his partner.

He'd had visitors other than Hannibal. Alana stopped by a couple times throughout the week, mostly to keep him updated about his classes. Beverly popped by bearing a bundle of helium balloons, claiming 'flowers were for dead people.' He couldn't say he agreed, but he appreciated the gesture, they brought color to the beige room.

Price brought a basket of mangoes, a leaflet of half-finished sudoku puzzles, and Zeller, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else, which was really just amusing.

Jack came bearing a manilla folder, it was obvious what he wanted the moment he set foot into the room. Will honestly was grateful when Hannibal swiftly escorted him outside.

"Uncle Jack says get well soon."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's all he said."

"There will always be more cases, he can spare you this one while you recover."

"What did you say to him?"

"I informed him that neither your doctors nor I recommend that you consult on any cases until your release. He could enter solely if it was to give you well-wishes. Apparently, he 'didn't have time for well-wishes' and departed shortly after."

"Damn, and here I thought that folder was a get-well-soon card."

"I'm sure the sentiment was still felt, even if the execution was…lacking."

“Oh, cut the crap. I know you’re happy he’s gone. You never liked the way he pushes.”

“I cannot say you’re incorrect. I admire his dedication, but his single-minded pursuits don’t leave much room for consideration. His treatment of you is rude, to put it mildly.”

“I doubt he cares much about being rude. He wants results, so he gets them any way he knows how. Lucky me, right?”

“You know my feelings regarding your work for Jack, so I won’t subject you to another lecture. Just know that you do have options, you don’t have to follow the path he and everyone else has laid out for you.”

It didn’t feel like he did, but he’d take Hannibal’s words into consideration, he deserved that much.

There was one more visitor that Will couldn’t help but physically feel the absence of. Abigail said she wanted to see him, didn’t she? Hopefully the staff at Port Haven weren’t preventing her from leaving, her autonomy was already in shambles.

Jack made a second appearance on day six of his stay. Hannibal had just left for his nightly ‘bring Will dinner’ run. He doubted this was a coincidence, whatever Jack wanted to say, he wanted to say it without Hannibal stopping him at the door.

“Evenin’ Jack.”

“Evening. How are you feeling?” He was forcing the pleasantry, it was obvious.

“Better, no more headaches.”

“That’s good. When do they let you out?”

“Tomorrow, but I’m supposed to be on bedrest ‘til next week.”

He hummed in response. Jack wasn’t a nervous figetter, but he was clearly anxious to say something.

“Listen, if this is about a case-”

“Nicolas Boyle’s body was found.”

“...What?”

“He’d been buried. We aren’t sure how long he’s been dead, decomposition could place it anywhere between a week and three months ago. Cause of death is a knife wound in his gut.”

“Was it a clean cut?”

“Jagged, likely from a hunting knife.”

“Hunting knife? Jack you don’t honestly think-”

“I don’t know what to think, that’s why I’m here. I have my suspicions but I need your confirmation. I know you feel protective over her, but I need you to look at this objectively.”

“Fine. Did you bring any pictures?”

He produced a small stack. Some were of Boyle’s body where it was found and some were more high-resolution shots of him in the lab.

It wasn’t as easy to sink into a scene if it wasn’t in person, but there was enough here that Will could still feel the mindset behind the act.

The pendulum swung once, twice, three times. Boyle’s skin turned from rotted yellow to the bloodless pale of fresh death.

The initial stab in his gut came at a surprise to his attacker, this wasn’t a planned kill. Every cut after the one that killed him though, those were all methodical, practiced.

His killer felt horrified at their actions, but in the wake of their panic, muscle memory took over. They had never killed before, or at least have never killed a person, but they had practice in butchery.

Associations came quick, they painted a clear picture he really didn’t want to see, but couldn’t look away from.

He couldn’t tell Jack, not until he had confirmation.

“I know you want it to be Abigail, but this wasn’t her.”

“How do you know?”

“The body was found miles from Port Haven, right? She doesn’t have any transportation. His killer was confident in their cuts, if this was Abigail’s doing there would be some defense wounds. Also, if she *was* following in her father's footsteps, his body wouldn’t be whole. You would’ve found him scattered in pillows, leather coats, and steaks, not in the ground. It’s wasteful.” It was alarming how easily the lie slipped from his lips.

“She hops the fence at night, we don’t know where she goes. She could have hitched a ride or met up with him.”

“Hannibal’s pursuing legal guardianship. She hates Port Haven, so she visits him. He keeps a spare room made up for her, so I’m guessing she just wants to sleep somewhere that isn’t a hospital bed.” Hannibal had a role in this, he knew more than he was letting on.

“Why didn’t she mention that then?”

“Probably because she didn’t want to get him in trouble. It could hurt him professionally and affect the process of becoming her guardian if this got out. She’s at a precarious spot, orphaned at 18, she doesn’t have a single asset and everyone treats her like a child, but no ones willing to take her in. These aren’t the actions of a killer, Jack, they’re the actions of someone desperately trying to keep her sanity.”

He sighed, beaten and resigned.

“Then we’re back to square one. Anything else you see here?”

“Nothing more than you’ve probably got already. The killer’s gonna be long gone, they hid the body well enough that they knew decomposition would cover their tracks. Nicolas Boyle’s been missing for months, he could’ve encountered anyone since then.”

It was at that moment that Hannibal returned to the room. Will hadn’t heard any approaching footsteps, but the man’s tread was unnaturally light, so it didn’t surprise him.

“Jack..” His voice contained a barely restrained warning.

“I was just leaving. Thanks for your time today, Will. I’ll see you back at headquarters.” He didn’t take the photos with him, leaving them spread across the bed.

Hannibal watched him leave, his derision obvious and undisguised. He froze for just a second when he saw the contents of the pictures, it was all the confirmation Will needed.

Neither spoke as Hannibal withdrew the containers of whatever gourmet supper he prepared this time. He didn’t even attempt to meet Will’s eyes.

“You’re really gonna make me bring it up?”

“I simply don’t wish to have this discussion now. You’re still recovering.”

“Oh, we’re talking about this now.” Hannibal shut the door and slid one of the smaller blankets into the crack underneath. “Abigail killed Nicolas Boyle, but I think you already know that.”

“I do.”

“Tell me why you know?” He knew what Hannibal was going to say, but he couldn’t help but dread the words as he spoke them.

“I helped her dispose of the body.” He sat on the edge of Will’s bed, but didn’t make any move to touch him. At the same time he was far too near and much too far away. Will wasn’t sure if he wanted to clutch him close or deck him.

“Why didn’t I know? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was worried how you might respond and Abigail feared you would go to Jack.”

“She killed someone, Hannibal. And you didn’t think I should know about it?”

“Her only crime was to defend herself, she is no more guilty than you for killing her father, or me for killing Tobias Budge.”

He didn’t know how to respond, so he didn’t. The silence was tense and stifling as he tried to organize his racing mind.

He was upset, but for all the wrong reasons. How could he fault her when she committed an act no more heinous than his own? Than Hannibal's? The only difference was that she would be hung for the deed where he was praised and Hannibal was scrutinized.

Hannibal was only trying to protect her. Wouldn't he have done the same? He realized he was more hurt that he was left in the dark than the fact she'd committed the crime and Hannibal covered it up. Abigail didn't trust him to protect her, his one duty.

He'd been pulling away. He visited her less frequently than he should, and he'd all but given up becoming one of her guardians. No wonder she didn't want Hannibal telling him.

"Did you tell Jack?" He still didn't meet Will's eyes, his focus was on smoothing out a wrinkle in the bedding instead.

"No, but it's…it's not right. It isn't our place to decide her guilt."

"If not ours then who's?" Suddenly the full weight of Hannibal's attention was focused on him. It froze him in place with the intensity. "Who knows Abigail better than you and I? We are her fathers now. We must serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

It was Will who broke eye contact first, he stared down at his arm where the IV was connected.

"Would you like me to leave?" Hannibal's voice was uncharacteristically soft. It didn't suit him.

"No. But you won't leave me in the dark again."

"I won't." There was a flash of *something* behind Hannibal's eyes. It was shadowed and for just a second, Hannibal seemed larger, more dangerous than he was. In another second, it was gone.

He finally made up his mind, he didn't want Hannibal to go, right now he wanted his soothing touch more than anything.

"Come here." Without another word, he joined him at the head of the small mattress. Will laid his head on his shoulder and breathed into his neck, comforting himself with the other man's scent.

"I hate you for not telling me, but…I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing. She's not her father, she shouldn't have to pay for his crimes."

Hannibal wrapped an arm around his side, careful not to jostle the IV. "You wouldn't hurt her. I realize that now."

"Never."

This wouldn't be the last time they spoke of this, but for now, all he wanted was to relax into the touch of the other man. Everything else could wait until tomorrow.

———

He was released the next morning with strict orders to not perform any strenuous activities.

The nurse gave both him and Hannibal a pointed look that, though distasteful, he would've found amusing if the atmosphere between them wasn't still so tense.

They didn't speak until they were alone in Hannibal's Bentley.

"I want to see her."

"I believe she'd like to see you as well."

"You'll take me to see her? Now?"

"I will, we have kept enough from you, I would not deny you her presence. Even if I felt the desire to do so."

They were quiet for a few minutes more. Will wanted to break the tension, go back to their easy back and forth, but he wasn't sure where to start. None of Hannibal's social graces had rubbed off on him and he didn't know what to say, so he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. Anything to cut through the silence.

"Did you mean it?"

"I rarely do not mean what I say, but you'll have to be more specific."

"When you said that we were her fathers now. Did you mean it?" He wasn't sure why he was asking, but at the moment it felt like the most important question in the world. Will hadn't stopped craving the little family they could create, the desire had gotten even stronger during their blooming relationship.

It didn't feel like a far off dream anymore. That was the worst part, that it was attainable.

"I did. We both have a responsibility for her. She is our fawn on the cusp of losing her spots. If she doesn't have a herd to join she will be culled on the dawn of the first day of bow season."

"And where do we stand? Are we among the hunters, aiming their guns in other directions? Or are we a part of the herd, larger targets to draw their fire?"

"Both. Neither. She is our charge, we are what she needs us to be. You are no stranger to donning the skin of another to catch your killers. It is not too much of a stretch to do so for her and your protection."

"Yours too. I can't just wear people like a coat though, Hannibal. I'm not stable enough that I can pick and choose who I am day by day. And what am I supposed to do? Lie to the FBI? Is that what you're asking from me?"

“No, but what I am asking from you is your consideration.” He put a hand over Will’s where it was clenched on his knee. “Morality is not so black and white. Good and evil, right and wrong, they all stem from a society precariously placed on childish ideals. Your desires are important to me, I want you to consider which ones are truly yours, that bring you pleasure, and which are those that have been thrust upon you.”

“I suppose you have some ideas about which desires are truly mine.” He tried to put some bite into his words, but it was softened when he covered Hannibal’s hand with his free one.

“I do, but you never fail to surprise me, so I won’t allege to know your thoughts. All I can claim is that common society has failed Abigail, they will label her a monster and burn her on a witch’s pyre. ‘Decent’ morality demands that we turn our daughter over to the authorities and wash our hands of her, but I’ve long since shed the principles of the common man. I know where my priorities lie, I’m curious about yours.” Despite his words, his tone was not forceful. It was curious and gentle, he squeezed Will’s hand, conveying what he couldn’t while his eyes were still on the road.

“I’m…not sure. So much has changed in the span of a few months, even before this I had a hard time telling which desires were mine and which were from the people around me. I don’t know what I want, other than you and to protect Abigail.”

“Then you have your starting point. Give it time, think deeply, I am in no rush to leave your side. Now, because of your actions, Abigail retains the little freedom she has. And Will?”

“Yes?”

“Whatever you decide, I shall remain with you. I’m afraid I couldn’t bear a separation now.”

Hannibal had a way of keeping him speechless. He wanted to be angry, but his sincerity sat on his chest like the dogs were prone to do whenever Will laid on the floor.

Really, what was there to be mad about? Hadn't Will already decided that he'd do the same thing if he was in Hannibal's shoes? And he was right, if this got out Abigail would be tried as an adult and found guilty. What right did other people have to convict her? How could they declare Will innocent, put him up for *commendation* when they'd have Abigail hung?

But Nicolas Boyle wasn't a killer. His traitorous brain supplied.

That didn't make Abigail a killer though, did it? Boyle wasn't innocent, he attacked her. What she did was self-defense.

If he came forward to the FBI he wouldn't just lose Abigail, but Hannibal too. The one good thing in his life would be tainted. Any moral quandaries aside, he couldn't bring himself to even consider it. He wouldn't go back to that lonely hell, not when his fantasy was a mere hand’s width away.

When he did speak, it was soft, but still heavy with conviction. “I don't think I could either.”

Hannibal's facial muscles twitched in what might've been relief. He drew Will’s hand to his mouth and placed soft, feather-light kisses on each of his fingertips. It might've been an apology, it might've been reassurance, but Will was just grateful for the contact.

Abigail's quarters were the same dull beige as the hospital room he spent the last week in. Hers was slightly more lived in, but there were only a scant few possessions that showed her personality.

No wonder she hopped the fence, if Will was confined here he would've run away months ago.

“Hello Abigail.” He could see a whole slew of emotions play across her face when Hannibal announced their presence. First was excitement, plain and desperate. Her smile was small, awkward, and unpracticed, she wasn't used to her lips forming the expression. Worry followed, she was scared what Will might do. It stung, but it made Hannibal’s silence all the more understandable.

“Hey,” She did her best to mask her fear with another awkward small smile. “I’m glad you're feeling better.”

He couldn’t stand the worry lurking behind her features, she deserved more than platitudes.

“I spoke to Jack.”

She paled immediately. “A-and?”

“He told me Nicolas Boyle’s body was found.” She shivered slightly, her eyes cast around the room until they landed on Hannibal. It was only then that the barest amount of tension leaked from her form.

“Do you think I’m a monster?”

“I could never.” Will crossed the room quickly and folded her into his arms. She gripped him tight, like a lifeline, he could feel tiny wet spots through his shirt where her face pressed into his shoulder.

He wasn’t sure if it was empathy or relief that brought the same wetness to his own eyes.

She didn’t shake, she was a solid weight in his arms, not the delicate thing the doctors and social workers made her feel like. If she was fragile, she wouldn’t have survived the years she did living with her first father. Will didn’t want that for her anymore, he didn’t want her to have to survive anyone. He wanted to watch her flourish in the sun, with any path she desired right at her fingertips.

Hannibal spoke only when they finally broke apart. “I’ve cleared your temporary release. The day is yours, Abigail, what would you like to do?”

“I want to meet the dogs.” When Will left his little home, it wasn't fit for company, but he'd be a dead man before he denied Abigail if she wanted to see it.

Chapter End Notes

alrighty were gonna get real funky with the canon div comin up :3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The drive to Wolf Trap wasn't as tense as he feared it would be. Abigail wasn't chatty, Will doubted she ever was, even in her happiest moments, but she and Hannibal clearly had a repertoire.

He asked after other patients and social workers that were giving her trouble, using their first names, references to previous conversations shared by the two of them. She asked specifics about recipes he'd planned and whether or not he got her that set of acrylic paints she wanted.

Will should have been there more, he should have spent more time at her bedside, he should've been able to understand every little reference the two of them made. But instead he'd abandoned her to her fear and allowed Alana to influence him.

No more. If he was to be her father, a father she deserved, protecting her wouldn't be enough. He'd provide for her, foster her interests, be there when she needed him.

Hannibal turned on a classical station, Will could see Abigail roll her eyes in the rearview mirror.

She tapped him on the shoulder and gestured for him to get closer. "Get him to change the station, this is all he listens to when I come over," She whispered.

He couldn't help but snort, Hannibal shot them a fondly suspicious look.

"Do you think I could change the station?"

"Not in the mood for Vivaldi? I can understand, not really the right atmosphere for lacrimoso." He pressed one of the preset stations on the dashboard radio, more orchestral music flowed out from the car's speakers.

Abigail's quiet giggle sounded from behind his seat, Hannibal just continued to drive unaffected.

Will pushed the button for the next preset station, the low tones of a cello sung through the Bentley. Abigail was struggling to hide her laughter behind her hand.

The next was gentle piano music, the next a drawn out melody from the brass section. Will hadn't even known there were this many orchestral stations in the Baltimore area.

By the time he reached the last of the presets, Abigail's little concealed giggle had crescendoed to full-fledged laughter. She sounded surprised and *alive* in a way Will had never seen her.

A few subdued chuckles came from the man behind the wheel, drawing Will's attention away from the girl clutching her gut in the back seat.

He felt his own lips pull into a smile, quick huffs of breath shortly devolved into a startled, snorting peal.

It wasn't even that funny really, but all three of them weren't people that laughed often. Will wasn't used to this, his side hurt, but it had been so *long* and he was so *damn happy.*

After that, conversation was easy. Will felt less like an outsider and they got Hannibal to concede control of the radio to a station playing relaxed 70s rock. Abigail said she recognized a few of the songs.

"This was the stuff Dad used to listen to." Her voice was sad but not choked, the smile didn't slip off her face the entire ride to Wolf Trap.

The dogs mobbed both Will and Abigail upon their arrival. Some were over the moon at Will's return, others were ecstatic to see someone new.

Winston whined until he nosed his way comfortably between Will's legs, more intent on licking the hand in front of him than letting Will scratch his ears. Buster was already aloft in Abigail's arms, wiggling and excitedly nipping at her ears.

Porter broke away first to follow Hannibal into the kitchen, food motivated as ever.

At Abigail's insistence, Will introduced them one by one. Her hands and face were shiny with dog slobber by the time he made it through all seven, but she didn't seem to mind. They definitely weren't on their best behavior at the moment, encouraged by her chants of 'good dog' to bark, jump, and paw as they pleased.

When she finally detached herself from the wiggly mass of animals, she turned to him, eyes bright and beaming.

"Take me fishing."

"Really? Right now?"

"Yeah, you wanted to, right? I liked hunting with Dad, it was relaxing to be outside, a part of nature. I don't think I can ever get that back, but I don't want to lose it all together. So I want you to take me fishing."

"You don't have to lose hunting. Even knowing what your father was, it doesn't change that he cherished you in those moments, not every memory has to become tainted. But I can understand why you want the distance."

"I don't know if I could do it alone. The memories would drown me if I went out there by myself. And I doubt any hunter would trust the daughter of the shrike near them with a weapon."

“Hannibal hunts. He wouldn’t let you go alone.” Hope showed in her wide eyes. This was important to her, her bond with her previous father was born on those trips. Even knowing what he was, it couldn’t be easy to just try to discard all that time and knowledge.

“He doesn’t seem the type.”

“He really doesn’t, but it's important to him. You should ask him about it some time.” Hannibal made it sound almost rapturous. The practice was sacred to him as well as deeply satisfying. He wanted to share it with Will, he’d want to share it with their daughter, he was certain.

“I will soon, when I’m ready. But right now I still want you to take me fishing.”

“Then I suppose we better find you a pair of waders.” Her grin was crooked, like Hannibal’s. They both had expressions of joy that sat odd on their faces, it just made them more charming in Will’s eyes.

He had two pairs of waders, he kept the old tattered ones for himself and helped Abigail adjust the straps on the newer pair until they didn’t hang loosely off her frame. They were still a bit too big, but they’d work just fine.

He let her pick from his wide variety of lures. She leaned towards the more muted ones with green and blue embellishments, but she couldn’t seem to stop stroking one of his more recent creations. It was small and dark red. He made it the day after he watched Hannibal save the life of Sylvestri’s victim.

He remembered making that lure fondly, he finally had inspiration for the strangely dark cardinal feather he found behind his home.

“You have a good eye. The bass that are active this time of year will really go for that one.”

“You could make this easier and just tell me which lures will work best. You’re the expert here.”

“It doesn’t matter too much what bait we use as long as it's enticing. It's all about the behavior you imitate. You make the fish feel safe, think you’re simply a struggling bug, and it won’t matter what color the feathers are.”

“I know all about making the prey feel safe,” She whispered. In a moment, she was far away, lost in memories Will couldn't hope to entirely understand. Empathy wasn't the same as experience, after all.

Will froze, he hadn’t even realized what he was saying and who he was saying it to.

“Abigail, I’m sorry I-”

“It’s okay. I…I still don’t know how I feel. About any of it.” She gained a little more of that quiet confidence back as she spoke, gently stroking the maroon lure all the while. “At one point I thought I could’ve been friends with those girls, they looked just like me. But now I

don’t think it was ever possible." She turned the lure over in her hand and brought it close to her face for examination. "What are these supposed to look like anyways?”

Will picked up a small light blue lure, barely the size of the first knuckle on his thumb. “Damsel and dragonflies mostly, along with the occasional caddisfly larva.”

“All those girls were damselflies,” She held the lure up to the late morning light streaming in through the window. “I only looked like them, but there was always something sharp embedded in me and I was tethered to my father. I always wondered if they could tell I was other. If they could, they either never noticed quick enough or were too nice to try to distance me.”

“You’re not tethered anymore. Do you still feel that hook inside of you?”

“It's still there, but I think it's no longer buried. It’s in my hand, pointed outward. I don’t know if I’m comforted that it's there or horrified.”

“You can’t predict when someone will run into your blade. You can’t be faulted for defending yourself.”

“And if it wasn’t defense? You saw the body, I didn’t stop at one cut.”

“I’m not sure Abigail.” Will didn’t stop at one bullet in her father’s chest either. “I’m not the one to judge whether or not you were justified. I decided a while ago that I’d protect you and support you. You have to find your own peace with your actions, but you don’t have to do it alone.”

She turned the lure back and forth in her hands, used the hook to poke at a scab near her cuticle.

“What happens to the lures after the fish consume them? Do they break?”

“Occasionally, but they’re easy to fix. Even if parts need to be replaced, they always come back whole, eventually.”

“Do you think I can be fixed?” She spoke softly, her words aimed at the floor.

“I don’t think you’re broken. I think people who don’t understand you convinced you that you were.”

“I like staying with Hannibal, he doesn’t make me feel broken. He said I could stay with him once I’m out of the hospital.”

“He wants to protect and support you too.”

She placed the little maroon lure in the tackle box they’d almost finished loading. With her hands now empty, she tugged at the raggedly sleeve of Will’s flannel and brought her forehead to his shoulder.

For a second he was unmoored, his hands felt oblong and awkward, but he forced the tension from his body in between heartbeats. With a shaky hand, he smoothed down her hair, too gentle a motion to be comparable to petting his dogs.

She didn't mention it when she pulled away, just flashed him a tiny grateful quirk of her lips before she wandered over to his wall of fishing rods.

Will hadn't even noticed that Hannibal fed the dogs until the man came into the living room to fetch Winston, who was still glued to Will's side. He wasn't even tempted when Hannibal opened his palm to reveal a small piece of meat, though a spot of drool did leak out of his mouth when he scented the offering.

"I don't believe he enjoys my company much."

"It's not you, he's just got some separation issues." Winston chose that moment to wander over to Abigail and plop his head in her lap as she adjusted the waders.

She smirked at the pair of them, a clear '*well he likes me so…*' written on her lips.

Will sighed, with a firm "Winston, go" he trotted off to the dog bowls in the kitchen to join the rest of the pack. He didn't even look at the meat in Hannibal's hand as he passed, the little shit.

Luckily, Hannibal just seemed amused. He shuffled the gear-clad pair into Will's tiny dining room where a spread of dishes laid. There were fresh pastries, eggs, fruits, jams and marmalades, still steaming slices of ham, and a dark orange juice in a plastic pitcher that Hannibal wouldn't be caught dead using at his own table.

The man was a wizard. If he kept this up, Will would never be able to go back to take-out and bland cafeteria food. He knew better than to say 'you didn't have to do this.' Hannibal almost never did something he didn't want to.

He forgot their audience for a moment and pressed a quick kiss to the corner of the other man's mouth with an emphatic "Thank you, this looks delicious."

"It was no trouble. Breakfast was the first meal I shared with both of you, it is only right that we have a proper spread for the first one we share together." Will wondered if the man ever made a meal that didn't have some sort of hidden symbolism.

Abigail shot Will a sly smile and teasingly made kissy faces at him while Hannibal was distracted filling his plate.

She dug in with much enthusiasm. It made sense, she'd been subjected to hospital food for months, Will would've snuck out too just for a taste of Hannibal's cooking.

The slices of ham were decadent and mouth-watering. Every aspect of his meals was Michelin star worthy, but the meat was always on another level. To say it was his specialty was putting it too mildly.

As he'd come to expect, Hannibal watched his first few bites with rapt attention. His eyes caressed the curve of Will's jaw and followed the bob of his throat. Always heavy, always intense, even in the calm of his little home with the colors of late morning streaming in.

Abigail was the one who first broke the comfortable silence. "Will's taking me fishing. Are you going to come?"

He took a moment to finish his bite and dab the corner of his mouth with a cloth napkin before he responded, ever the gentleman.

"I'd like to, though I'm content to simply watch."

"Not elegant enough?"

"It is well into autumn and I tend to avoid the cold whenever possible. I simply don't believe I would be good company in the water."

"You'd get cranky if your nice suit got all wet."

"If you must put it simply." She hid her teasing behind a jam-covered biscuit.

It was then, in the brightness of encroaching midday and the clink of silverware on his good plates, that Will realized he was in love. This pair of people dining at his table were really all that mattered to him, and he'd do whatever it took to keep them safe.

It seemed too sudden. He hadn't even known the both of them for a year, but he couldn't remember a time when he felt this secure, even before the encephalitis. His house for once felt full and warm, not oppressive.

He spooned some more eggs on Abigail's plate and laid his hand on Hannibal's knee under the table. Nothing good in his life ever lasted, he'd make sure this would.

"Come here Abigail." Hannibal directed her to stand in front of him as they were about to leave, hands full of fishing poles, nets, and tackle boxes. Gently, he weaved a braid, not too tight, but it also wasn't lumpy and loose.

Wills was enraptured, not by the movement of his hands, though they were quick and practiced as ever, but by the expression on his face. His movements were rooted in the present but his eyes spoke of somewhere far in his past, they were wet though no tears were shed.

In this one moment, Will could read him. For just a brief second, he felt what it was to be Hannibal Lecter.

There was a girl, much younger than Abigail, but he was much younger too. It was winter, snowflakes caught in the young girl's hair. He didn't hate the cold yet.

She giggled as he quickly weaved her hair, he laughed back. It was easy back then.

The expression closed just as quickly as it opened, not soon enough for Will to miss the quick flash of horror that sparked through his gut. It didn't take a genius to figure out that something happened to the girl that Abigail reminded him of, but there was something else that happened to him. And whatever it was set him off the typical path for his entire life.

Maybe one day Hannibal would tell him, for now he'd hold this secret he kept close to his chest, nestled between his heart and rib cage.

The dogs followed as they made their way to the stream. Will had to call for Porter a couple of times to keep him from trying to nose through the picnic lunch Hannibal was toting. Most of them ran ahead, already knowing their destination, but a few were still excited about Abigail's continued presence. Russel found a large branch and almost close-lined her legs when he tried to show it to her.

It wasn't the most opportune time of day to catch many fish, and the dogs would scare away the few that were out. The late autumn weather would force them back inside after just a few hours as well. Despite the less than perfect conditions, Will's heart was full.

Hannibal watched the first few uncoordinated casts from his spot reclined against an oak tree. The line flew towards the reeds along the bank, the trees overhead, and once even behind them. Eventually Will coaxed her hand into something more controlled, it wouldn't take long before Abigail wouldn't need any guidance. He was already teaching her how to flick her wrist to make the lure mimic a skittering insect.

The first bite actually occurred on Abigail's pole. She looked startled, the tug was distinctly different from the ones from a line caught in the reeds. Her wide eyes caught his.

"What do I do now?"

"Pole straight up, reel it in gently but keep a firm grip. Make sure the line is taut but don't rush, it could slip out if you reel it in too fast."

Desperate ripples appeared at the surface of the water, he could almost make out the flash of scales as she dutifully drew the fish closer. The tip of her pole wasn't bent far, it must not be that big, but it put up a valiant fight all the way until it was close enough for Will to scoop it up in the handheld fishing net.

It was a bluegill, not the largest he'd ever seen, but certainly not the smallest. He handed off the net with the still struggling fish in order to work the hook and lure from its mouth. With a final yank and a small ooze of blood, the hook was free, the fish gasped for a watery breath as it suffocated in the air too saturated with oxygen for its gills.

Abigail grasped the wriggling fish in a tight grip with both of her hands, her pole securely hooked onto a loop on her waders. She watched with fascination as it eventually stopped thrashing and its gasps became weaker and more infrequent. Will wondered if this was a good idea after all, exposing her to the death of an animal, but her grip didn't loosen until it sat totally still in her palm.

Reserved claps came from the treeline. One of Hannibal's knees was propped up in order to hold his sketchbook while the other was currently occupied by Millie's blocky head, resting on his thigh. She seemed annoyed by the movement of his hands.

"Stellar performance, Abigail!"

A triumphant laugh burst from her lips as she held the dead fish aloft. "I got one!" She trudged over to the empty cooler perched on the bank and placed it carefully inside, like she was afraid it might flop back out.

He shouldn't have been worried, the smile she flashed him was wide and as bright as the sun.

Will busied himself with prepping the line for the next cast so hopefully the girl next to him couldn't see the wet sheen covering his eyes. That desperate fantasy he hadn't let himself hope for had come true. The dogs were running around, playing in the trees and disturbing the water, his daughter was at his side excitedly recounting how weirdly sharp the scales of the bluegill were, and the man he loved was watching them with the softest, fondest expression Will had ever seen.

He wished he knew how to draw, he wanted to frame this image: Abigail's eyes the color of the blue-gray sky, Hannibal's hand resting atop his aging dog's head, the stream- Will's inner sanctum- blessed by their presence. He wouldn't be able to return here without recalling this moment, for once he was grateful down to the soles of his feet that his eidetic memory would recall every moment, every tiny detail.

By the time Will's legs started going numb from the cold water, they'd caught four fish overall, not large by any means but enough for dinner. He was used to the cold- ice fishing was one of his favorite pastimes in the winter- but he could see Abigail shivering slightly, and Hannibal had begun to spread out the covered dishes he brought.

She helped him repack the tackle box and get everything in order, though she insisted on carrying the cooler.

Hannibal sliced off small chunks of what looked like salami and tossed it to the dogs to keep them occupied while they quickly ate. The meal was delicious, as always, but Will could tell his… his family was anxious to be back in the warmth of his little home.

Abigail led the charge when they finally decided to head in. The cooler wasn't light and the too-large waders made her gait clumsy and awkward, but still she skipped around with the dogs weaving in between her legs.

"Will you stay the night?" The excited yips and crunch of leaves wasn't enough to cover Will's voice, Hannibal was near enough to lean against after all.

"If you'll have us. They don't expect her back until tomorrow."

"Good I, I don't want this to end just yet."

“Who says it must come to an end? To me it feels like another beginning.”

“I don’t know, I want it to be a beginning, but good things don’t last for me. I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the blindfold to be ripped from my head revealing that everything was just a figment of my imagination.”

Hannibal tucked his free hand into the crook of Will’s elbow, he saw it as the reassurance it was. “You already know what it’s like to confuse fiction with reality. This is reality, Will. It will last as long as you allow it to.”

“I know, I’ll do everything I can to make sure it stays.” He didn't have a free hand, so he just leaned into Hannibal's touch. “You know, I used to fantasize about this. The three of us together, just like this. I used to think it was a hopeless dream, so far away I might as well have wished for the moon.”

“Is it really so unbelievable? For me it seemed inevitable since the day we met.”

“Fate?”

“Perhaps, though I suspect we would have ended up intertwined eventually, even if our torsos remained barren. You intrigued me, I doubt I could have left you alone.”

“So what? You would’ve just shown up at my door every morning with breakfast?”

“Would you have minded? You haven’t complained about my cooking yet.”

“Maybe at first, but you're very persuasive. I'd never say no to a free meal.”

“And I’m very persistent. You’re far less jaded than you want others to believe. You can read anyone, assume any point of few, so I’m curious why you choose to keep yourself alone out here, and why my presence has been allowed.”

“You know why, you just want to hear me say it.” The little sly smile on Hannibal’s face said *guilty as charged.* “Other people are loud, my mind gets forced down in favor of replicating theirs. It’s exhausting and I don’t know how to turn it off. Every other partner I’ve had eventually realized that I was simply performing for them, reading their expectations and attempting to be exactly that, not myself. When I was with other people, I didn’t even know what my ‘self’ was, he was buried too deep. It’s different when I’m with you. I have to work so hard to just read the surface of your thoughts. I’m still not sure of your motivations now. I anticipated it worrying me but honestly, it's just relaxing. You’re inscrutable, Dr. Lecter, and I enjoy it quite a bit.”

Now Hannibal was definitely preening, but Will just found himself charmed. His cheeks were red, either from the cold or flattery, it was an attractive look on him. He couldn’t help but picture the last time he’d seen the other man flushed. The heat in his lower gut staved off the cold with ease.

“I’ve been called inscrutable on occasion but I don’t believe it’s ever been meant as a compliment. To be perfectly honest, this is all rather new to me as well.”

“Don’t lie to me, you’ve had quite a few partners in the past. You don’t exactly hide it.”

“I’ve had affairs, not partners. I never expected any of them to last.”

“Because they weren’t your soulmate?”

“Because they weren’t you, darling. I’d tire of any other mind sooner or later, but you’ve effortlessly surprised me since the day I met you. I can’t help but anticipate where we’ll be in the future, but I’ve learned by now that I cannot presume to know your actions.”

“I don’t see what’s all that surprising, but if it means you’re sticking around I guess I’ll do my best to keep you on your toes.”

“I look forward to it.”

The dogs were well behaved enough to wait outside the door in order for Will to wipe off their mud-covered paws.

Abigail helped him reopen the second floor while Hannibal took care of the fish. It was dusty, he hadn't been up here in years, except to occasionally grab something from storage. Plastic totes were packed in what used to be a study, but the guest bedroom was relatively untouched. It just needed a change of sheets and a quick vacuum.

She assisted him struggling with the corners of the fitted sheet, he always hated these things. Her eyebrows were pinched, she held tension in her forehead, her wide eyes hit his face and slid off like he was an oil slick. There was something she wanted to ask him but she was worried what he might think of her.

“What is it, Abigail?”

“You were lying, right? When you told me about killing. It was terrifying and earth shattering, but not ugly.”

“I wanted it to be ugly. There's nothing in the world more precious than a human life, surely I should feel tainted somehow but…”

“But you don't. It made you feel powerful.”

“A quiet sense of righteousness. Hannibal told me it made sense, ‘Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good.’”

“Does he know? Has Hannibal taken a life?”

“Yes, a killer attacked me, his patient, and then him. He killed him right in his office.”

“A hero. Did he say he felt the same? Righteous?”

“He did.”

“Then I'm the odd one out.”

“How did it feel for you Abby-Abigail?” The nickname just slipped out, hopefully she only heard it as a stutter.

“Easy. My knife just…slipped inside him. Like wet clay. There wasn't any tough hide or fur to protect his soft underbelly. Even now that's all I can think about, how easy it was. They said my father had a compulsion, one he couldn't control, but now I wonder. Maybe he did it just because it was easy and he knew how to do it.”

“We can't know what he was thinking or exactly why he did what he did.”

“You can. Tell me what you felt when you were him.” Her eyes were piercing, desperate and imploring. Garrett Jacob Hobbes haunted her and Will suspected he would no matter what he said.

“Your father wasn't a psychopath. He felt deeply and he regretted that those girls died but he felt it was a necessity. It was a compulsion, but he was still acutely aware of what he was doing. I won't lie to you and say he didn't want to hurt you, he did, but he couldn't bear your death. None of it was easy for him.”

She looked relieved, horrified still, but also relieved.

“Was it easy for you?”

“It was easy to pull the trigger. But you probably didn’t want to hear that, that it was easy to kill your father.”

“No, it's oddly relieving. Makes me feel less crazy, less like him.” She smoothed down the sheets slowly, her eyes were distant, clouded over in memories. “Your house is so different from Hannibal's. It's much closer to my parents’, but it feels so much more full. I knew what my father was, Mom didn't, but I think she suspected something was wrong. The air always tasted scared.”

“You can stay here. If you want, when you're not at Hannibal’s.” The look she gave him was sad but grateful. He could see this room filling with her belongings, he'd build a shelf for her books, an easel for her paintings. Maybe a station to tan leather.

They finished quickly, she hugged him before retreating downstairs, this time without a single tear.

——

The day passed quickly, too quickly in Will’s opinion. He wanted to savor every second, he wanted for this one afternoon to last a decade.

Unfortunately there's only 60 minutes in an hour and far too few hours before his body would want him to rest. He had to stop himself from counting the seconds as they ticked by.

For once, even if he was alone in a room, he never felt alone in his home. He could always spy Hannibal or Abigail through a doorway, or hear the sounds of footsteps and conversation in the rare moments he was behind closed doors.

By the time night fell, he'd almost gotten used to the feeling of a full home.

As Abigail trotted upstairs, three of the dogs followed her. She'd be lucky if she got a sliver of the bed to herself.

Will grabbed more blankets than he'd used the last few months. They weren't just for the man sharing his bed and his aversion to the cold, but also for himself, he optimistically hoped. In the last few days of his hospital visit, he hadn't woken up covered in a cold sheen of sweat. With any luck, that wasn't solely attributed to the sedatives.

He grabbed Hannibal the same sleep clothes he wore the last time he spent the night. Previously, he hadn't truly appreciated what a novel experience it was to see the man wearing cheap cotton. He turned down the shirt, and Will couldn't fault him, his mark was a comforting sight. Almost as comforting as the warm embrace of his arms.

Will rarely thought himself a lucky man, or at least he didn't used to, but right here, right now, he felt like the luckiest man on the planet.

For all Hannibal's talk of God and his power, Will was certain he did not exist. No just, all-knowing being would allow Will, and all his inner darkness, to experience this genuine joy. The closest thing he found to God was the man in his arms, he facilitated everything leading up to this moment, presented it up on an altar. And all Will had to do was offer the sacrifice of Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He privately thought he would've killed that man a thousand more times in order to end up here.

The thick blankets did a good job staving off the cold night air, but it was just pleasantly chilly enough that they could comfortably wrap themselves in each other.

Will wasn't really in the mood for anything deliberately arousing, for now he could pretend that all he wanted was soft domesticity. Abigail was trying to sleep upstairs as well, and with no doors concealing their bed in the living room, it just felt inappropriate. That didn't mean they couldn't share languid drawn-out kisses in the comforting dark.

Ever since their first encounter, Will had been drawn to Hannibal's sharp jaw. He was such an unflappable man, strong and solid. The soft skin near his jugular was almost his antithesis, that he allowed Will to graze and abuse the vulnerable spot was enrapturing. He didn't bite down hard like he had other nights, but he teased and worried the skin until he could see a pronounced bruise even in the low light.

The heavy breaths that came from Hannibal weren't desperate, there wouldn't be any frantic rutting tonight, but they did speak to how much this affected him. He crushed Will impossibly closer, his hand fisted his curls tightly as Will worked.

When he finally pulled away, the hand in his hair moved to cup his jaw. They moved their mouths together slowly, without hassle. He was finally starting to realize that this didn't have

to be temporary.

Hannibal placed a couple small bites to the tips of the antlers on Will's neck, a reminder to their last encounter. Apparently, even in their slowest, gentlest, most drawn out trysts, they wouldn't be able to get away without a few bites.

It suited Will just fine, as much as what they had wasn't anyone's business but their own, he realized he had an emerging possessive streak. This man was his, and for the love of God he would *not* let him go.

He wouldn't go back to that lonely hell.

Hannibal pulled back slowly with a fair amount of reluctance. "I'm afraid that if we take this much further, we may stumble into activities not suited for a room without doors while our charge is sleeping upstairs."

Will grumbled half-heartedly in response. He didn't disagree, he could feel himself starting to get more worked up than he desired, but he was still going to complain about it.

Christ, Will was going to jump him the next time they were alone. He was already pent up from his extended stay at the hospital.

Their legs tangled under the sheets while they adjusted their arms and torsos until neither would wake up with pins and needles.

Will thought that if he could fall asleep like this every night, he would be satisfied. Already he was dreading the next night he'd be sleeping alone.

Chapter End Notes

me tryin to see how much sap i can fit into these last few chapters before we get back to the normally scheduled murder

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was later than he typically started his day, but the cage of Will's arms and the warmth of his bed blew massive blows to even his rock-solid self control.

Alas, he was a man of routine, and restlessness could only be staved off for so long by sleep tangled curls and bare skin. It was time to start breakfast.

Cooking calmed him, not that he ever let himself worry much. Though recently, he'd had a lot more on his mind than he had the last few years. A whole new range of emotions had been unlocked for him, and despite his best attempts, they were lingering.

He wasn't even sure if he wanted to banish them at this point. They were a risk to his lifestyle, but he found he cared very little about keeping it the same as before he met Will Graham. If he died, if Hannibal ate him, that dull stagnation would return.

For other people, pain and agony were the worst things they could experience, Hannibal reveled in it, even if it was his own. Any strength of emotion was savored and acted upon when he felt so little. No, the most awful sin life could inflict on him was sloth, his beloved's quick mind never left him bored. He was keeping the man blinded, yes, but he never felt *other* when Will was in the room.

They were two monsters of the same species, Hannibal knew this intrinsically. It would just take a bit more coaxing before his breaching black antlers showed themselves in broad daylight.

He heard the soft tap of animal nails on the hardwood floor. Winston sat in the doorway that separated the room where he and Will slept the night before and the kitchen. He sat still as a statue, his big brown eyes tracked each one of Hannibal's movements with rapt attention, not interest though, he'd never seen a dog watch a person with so much suspicion.

Perhaps Winston's nose was just as keen as his, he could smell the death on him.

He paid the dog little mind as he poured more oil over a pan of frying potatoes. As sharp as the dog's instincts were, he wouldn't turn up his nose at the cuts Hannibal added to his food. The animal was family to Will, which meant he was family to Hannibal, and all of his family would indulge in the meat he worked so hard to provide.

A sharp rap of knuckles sounded from the front door. Some of the dogs perked up at the noise, but none of them barked. They were very well trained. He set the pan aside with an annoyed sigh, the potatoes would keep, but they wouldn't be as crisp.

He spotted a flash of red behind the frosted pane of the front door. Scenting the air confirmed his suspicions. Quickly, he fixed the sweater he donned, making sure it sat low enough on his

neck to expose the dark suck bruises Will left, but not the permanent black marks.

As soon as he opened the door, his eyes were accosted by the bright flash of Lounds' camera. He didn't flinch, his expression remained placid, though her boorish actions made him want to reach out and rip her tongue from her throat.

"Good morning Ms. Lounds. A tad early for an interview, wouldn't you say?" He closed the door firmly behind him, Will wouldn't appreciate Lounds skulking around his home.

"People are more honest before they've had their coffee." She shot a pointed look at his neck. "Bit strange to see a psychiatrist in his patient's home this early."

"Will was never officially my patient. And I believe this is classified as trespassing."

"I'll be out of your hair if you just answer a couple of my questions. My readers are very eager to know why the shrike's daughter is playing house with two convicted murderers."

She whipped the camera up and snapped another picture as soon as the door opened behind him. *Rude.*

Will still looked sleepily disoriented, but he'd had enough sense to throw on a thin t-shirt and sweatpants. A surge of possessive pride shot through Hannibal at the sight of him. He wore both the hickies and their soulmark proudly, like a brand. Lounds' smirk told him she was already writing headlines. He wondered what Jack's reaction would be.

"Morning *special* agent Graham. Glad you could join us. Dr. Lecter was just about to tell me how the two of you ended up housing Ms. Hobbs. Seems there's a lot of murder in this one household at the moment."

Will crossed his arms over his chest, his posture closed and angry.

"What are you trying to imply?"

"Nothing. Simply asking what your intentions are with Abigail Hobbs."

His eyes narrowed, he was still angry but something a little more controlled settled on his face. He glanced in Hannibal's direction and seemingly found what he was looking for.

"You're short on stories, Freddie. You're looking into the domestic affairs of the side characters of previous articles, not exactly front page material. You don't run a gossip mag, so did you run out of criminals? Or did your sources finally wise up and cut you off like a diseased limb." His eyes burned with a look that was cold, sharp, and piercing. There was violence behind them, exquisite retribution, the kind that made beautiful inspiration for Hannibal's pieces.

Did Will realize how close he was to ascension? One more step and he'd be free falling right into the warm dark embrace of a true predator's skin. Hannibal would be right there to catch him when he finally took the plunge.

“I think there’s plenty of story to be found here. Tell me, did you have encephalitis before or after you orphaned the girl staying in your home? Shame you didn’t wait until you killed someone else though, would have made for the perfect excuse.”

“This is private property. I don't want to have to call the poli-”

“Will? Is someone…oh.” Lounds’ camera flashed again, apparently she couldn't resist getting a shot of the three of them. He had a feeling this would be the cover photo for whatever article she'd inevitably write. Will looked like he was about ten seconds from attempting to rip her head off, especially after Abigail’s pronounced flinch.

“Hello Abigail. You're aware that both these men are convicted murderers, correct? Do you feel safe here? It's quite isolated. Or perhaps it comforts you, staying with men so like your father.” Abigail’s posture mirrored Will’s, in a heartbeat she went from weary to closed off and enraged.

“They're nothing like my father.” She didn't yell, that was promising. There's a time and place for passionate rage, but not here in front of prey that would live to see the coming days.

He considered Freddie Lounds once again, how quickly she imbued murderous fury in both his fledgling hunters. There was potential here, she could become a valuable tool in the upcoming weeks.

“Are you so sure? Your father was insane, I’m not the only one who's seen that in Will Graham.”

She spoke through clenched teeth. “I am.”

“Get off my property Freddie, if you're not gone in the next minute I'm calling the cops.” Will moved in front of their daughter, physically blocking Lounds’ offensive presence. “Hannibal, could you take her inside please?”

He happily complied, though he'd honestly love to hear whatever Will planned to spew at the reporter.

Winston licked Abigail’s hand the moment she stepped back in Will’s little home. The corner of the dog’s lip twitched up, like he was about to growl but he was too docile to actually produce a sound. It wasn't directed at Hannibal, his eyes were firmly focused on the closed door behind them.

Abigail quietly stroked the dog’s ear, caressing the soft fur gently as her other hand clenched. She was grinding her teeth, he could see from the subtle back and forth of her jaw.

Will returned after successfully fending off Lounds, he was just as agitated but it was more controlled. He didn't slam his front door, he wasn't one to take out his frustration on anything or anyone other than its intended recipient. He'd make a good father and an even better hunter.

“I'm sorry…” She kept her eyes aimed at her feet. “She's doing this because I backed out on that book.”

“You've done nothing wrong, Abigail.” Hannibal covered her fist with his hand, carefully unclenching her fingers one by one. “Freddy Lounds is entirely self-serving, she never would have abided by the agreement you made.”

“She’s going to write about you, both of you. You’ll get in trouble, right?”

“No more than we are equipped for. She's already proved she has a personal vendetta against Will, it's her own prerogative if she chooses to further damage her character.”

“But still, that picture she took…you were trying to keep *that* quiet, weren't you?”

“Will’s and my partnership is the business of no one but ourselves, but while unconventional, it is entirely above board.”

“It's nothing for you to worry about, Abby,” Will reassured. “People will think what they will. I'm happy as long as you’re safe, and as bothersome as Lounds is, she won't publish outright lies.” He didn't seem to notice his slip up.

Her watery eyes sparkled with relief, she hugged the both of them.

Hannibal returned to his post in the kitchen as soon as tensions started to recede, if he was lucky he made it in time to salvage the potatoes.

——

It had taken less than 24 hours for Lounds to produce her article. He hadn’t read it and honestly had no desire to, but he was sent a link to it less than an hour after it was posted.

> *first of all, this thing is utter garbage. one of her worst yet*

> *clearly shes out to get u, no ones gonna take this crap seriously*

Beverly attached the offending article, just from the thumbnail he could tell it was tasteless.

> *second, nice. you two got the same weird energy, it works, im happy for ya.*

> *dunno how i didnt c it before*

> *third, jacks not thrilled but i got ur back ;)*

Will wasn’t that old, but texting always made him feel geriatric.

> *ill talk to him. thanks bev*

She responded before he could even return to his phone’s home screen, he wondered how she typed so fast.

> *np, take it easy*

Reluctantly, he clicked the link. It didn't look like it ended up as front page material luckily, but it was prominently featured in her article about Garrett Jacob Hobbs, one of the most trafficked on the site.

Unlikely Trio: the Daughter of the Shrike now Playing House with Two Convicted Killers? the headline read. Tasteless, just like he thought, but that was Lounds' speciality.

In the article, she never explicitly stated they were doing anything illegal, he wasn't even sure that it counted as crime reporting. That hadn't stopped her before though, this wasn't the first article she'd written calling him a killer. Beverly was right, it was all inane conjecture that painted all three of them in a bad light. It was obvious she was holding a grudge to anyone with enough sense to look past the buzzwords and sensationalism.

The article itself was insulting, but honestly what was worse was the photo she pasted front and center. It was of Abigail, Hannibal, and himself all in their pajamas, his and Abigail's hair still mussed from sleep. Hannibal looked a little more put together, but when didn't he.

Abigail was visibly flinching back from the flash of the camera, she wouldn't like how fragile the photo made her look. Lounds probably got some sick pleasure out of capturing her in that state after having been denied the capital she would've made from the book deal.

The other obvious offense was the attention the framing drew to the red hickies on both Will's and Hannibal's necks and the dark marks peeking over the loose collar of the t-shirt Will hastily threw on. She could have very easily blurred those out, a simple fix that even Will could have done with his non-existent knowledge of editing software.

Of course she didn't though, it gave the whole image a sordid tinge. It would be good for ratings and bad for both his and Hannibal's privacy and professional careers. What a mess.

Hannibal had good lawyers though, maybe they'd be able to sue her. He couldn't help but feel it wasn't punishment enough.

His phone rang, prompting him to close the article in disgust. That would probably be Jack. Will waited until the last ring just to put off the lecture he was surely about to get for just a few more seconds.

"Hey Jack."

"I assume you know why I'm calling?" He didn't even attempt any niceties, but that was the type of man Jack was- no nonsense.

"If you're gonna chew me out for seeing him, I don't wanna hear it. I need something outside this work, surely you can understand that."

"I can, it just doesn't seem like a very good idea to be sleeping with your therapist."

"He was never my therapist. You made sure it wasn't official so he didn't have to abide by doctor-patient confidentiality laws when you wanted to check in on me. He wasn't even getting paid for the sessions."

“It’s not healthy. I expected you both to be professionals.”

“We are, not that it’s anyone else’s business. And why do you care? He helps me see your killers so it shouldn’t matter, right?” That gave him pause, clearly he hadn’t expected Will to have a rebuttal primed and ready.

“I still don’t believe it's a wise idea. What if things go south? I think you should see another psychiatrist.”

“No, I’m not doing all of this again. I told you, therapy doesn’t work on me, but Hannibal’s methods do.” Jack didn’t see all the time Hannibal spent at his hospital bed, how often he brought him down from a crisis, and his steadfast acceptance. He didn’t see that since the beginning Hannibal had cared for him far more than he would a normal patient.

Jack also didn’t see the rotating cast of therapists, shrinks, psychologists, and other psychiatrists that attempted to categorize Will’s thinking before Hannibal came along.

“Try to convince him to back down if you want, but I’m not budging.”

“Alright, just don’t come crying to me when this blows up in your face.”

“It won’t. Bye Jack.” Will hung up before he could say anything else.

He wanted to be pissed, but all his anger was still focused solely on Lounds. Jack hadn’t accosted him and his family at his home the day after his release from the hospital. Will hated her when she was just targeting him, but now she broadened her focus to the people Will held most dear. It was unacceptable.

He spent the morning entertaining himself with thoughts of ripping off her fingers one by one so she couldn’t spew filth about them anymore.

———

Hannibal returned to Will’s little home a couple hours after the sunset. He took Abigail back to Port Haven that morning and had to return to seeing patients the rest of the day.

Will tried to pretend that his home didn’t feel overwhelmingly empty in his and Abigail’s absence, but he was largely unsuccessful. He spent most of his time trying to read, fumbling through knots on his flies, and spending time with the dogs.

It wasn’t enough. By nature, Will wasn’t a sociable person, but there was a pronounced difference between being alone in a room and being alone in a home. Without work to distract him, all he had were his own anxious thoughts. It was easier to convince himself that his little family was a permanent fixture when they were in front of him, but right now trying to hold on to them felt like he was attempting to grasp water.

At his weakest moment he buried his face in the pillow Hannibal slept on last night. Just to convince himself he was really here the night before.

Hannibal walked in bearing raw produce and sealed meats- ingredients for tonight's meal. It broke Will from his stupor.

He wanted to touch him, he needed that reassurance of his presence, but he didn't want to seem desperate, it had been less than twelve hours since they'd seen each other after all.

"Good evening, love. I've missed you." Hannibal deposited his bags on the counter and cradled Will's cheeks in his now free hands. He melted into the contact, his fears abruptly tossed to the wayside. Perhaps he should be more concerned by the fact that Hannibal could read his desires with the scary amount of accuracy he could, but he wasn't. To be known to this degree was thrilling, he reveled in it.

"I missed you too." He hooked his thumbs in the belt loop of Hannibal's slacks and drew him flush against his body. They were close enough in height that he barely had to tilt his head to join their lips once again. Practice had turned the act easy and natural, he felt like he could breathe again even though his air was currently being stolen from his lungs. "I want you. Now."

Hannibal pulled back and considered him, both their arousals were becoming obvious where they were conjoined at the hips, Will could read a rapidly losing battle in the other man's eyes. "Are you sure you would forgo supper? You must be hungry." The doctor protested, but his heart wasn't in it. He was hungrily glancing at Will's lips and wandering hands.

"Positive. Are you going to take me to bed or not? I'd hate to have to start without you." Entirely an empty threat, Hannibal probably knew it too, but it still got the man moving. He was dismayed when he saw his destination was the kitchen though, not the bed in the living room.

"Hannibal if you don't want to-" Will felt the heat from his gaze lance threw his sternum and land in his gut.

"Give me just a moment to put these away. I won't have the meat spoiling because we got far too carried away and forgot its presence." He bustled about quickly, his typical staunch neatness tossed to the wayside in favor of simply getting the stuff away as fast as possible. He was affected by this deeply, though he was valiantly trying not to show it.

Will joined him, tossing containers in the cupboard and fridge without much consideration. He spent more time invading the other man's space than actually helping. A knee found its way between his thighs, a breath to his neck, a brazen hand to his ass. It felt more like foreplay than a chore, it wouldn't surprise him if that was the game Hannibal was choosing to play at the moment.

The final item found its spot in Will's cupboard, and Hannibal rounded on him like a man possessed. He caged Will in against his own countertop, pushing their bodies flush against each other once again. His thigh slipped between his legs, forcing them further apart.

Will groaned as he bore his hips down on the beautiful friction now pressing into him. He pushed his hands into Hannibal's open jacket that still hadn't been shed in order to pull them even closer together and grind more easily against the invading limb.

Hannibal's hands left the countertop where they were currently boxing him in and snaked down to palm his ass. Will gasped into the other man's mouth as they found their purchase and hoisted him aloft. His legs instinctively wrapped around his trim waist as he hastily shuffled them to where Will's bed was perched. Honestly it was amazing he didn't trip over any dogs in the process.

He threw Will onto the bed with only enough consideration that he wouldn't bump his head against the wall. Both scrambled to remove their clothing; jackets, shirts, and belts were haphazardly discarded in the name of desperate haste.

Will had been waiting for this for *weeks,* maybe some other time they'd entertain themselves with lengthy strip-teases, but right now all he wanted was to be skin to skin with the man currently fumbling with his ridiculous three-piece suit.

His own flannel and jeans were off before Hannibal had even made it to his slacks. Teasingly, he let his legs fall open, fully exposing his hard cock and the smooth untouched skin underneath.

"Merde," Hannibal said in the softest, most emphatic tone Will had ever heard from him. In a second he was abandoning the bed, Will heard his front door slam. He left his house without a shirt in the freezing temperatures, he was pretty sure it was snowing at the moment. Will didn't have time to worry though, because just a moment later he heard the slamming of his front door once again as Hannibal all but ran back to him.

He was touting a small opaque plastic bag whose purpose became clear after he tossed it lightly onto the bed and condoms and lube tumbled out inelegantly. He pulled Hannibal down on top of him before he could return to fighting with his tightly fitted slacks.

His nails raked down Hannibal's bare back, he bit Will's lower lip in response. No blood was drawn yet, but it wouldn't take long before it spilled in thick rivulets. Hastily, he pushed his tongue into Hannibal's open mouth, running it along his teeth. He caressed his sharp canines, pushed into them with the tip of the sensitive muscle. If he cut his tongue on Hannibal's teeth, he'd feel it constantly for days, he could agitate it and reopen the wound to remind himself of this moment.

He pressed his tongue harder, Hannibal seemed to get the memo and bit down harshly. The skin broke right at the tip, where it was most sensitive. Will could feel the movement of his throat as he greedily swallowed the tiny trickle of blood that spilled.

His hands slipped into Hannibal's slacks and pushed them and his clearly expensive boxers down hastily. He didn't bother to go further, not when his prize was *finally* exposed to his touch.

He made a loose fist around the other man's cock. It was thick, long, and wet at the tip; he gathered some of the pre-cum that beaded onto his fingers and brought it to his lips. He'd never tasted another man before, it was saltier than he expected, but not at all unpleasant, the cut on his tongue stung. The real kicker was the whole body shiver he felt as Hannibal watched him, completely enraptured. He dove for the taste of himself and Will's blood that mingled in his mouth.

Suddenly, he felt far too empty for his liking, there was a dull ache low in his gut that was becoming more and more pronounced. “I want you inside me,” He begged. *“Please.”*

“Anything for you, love.” His voice was infuriatingly steady, Will wanted it mangled by pants and raw emotion. Hannibal pulled back for just a second to fling away the slacks still stubbornly attached to his strong thighs. As soon as he regained his rightful place, Will struck, he grabbed him harshly by the neck and pulled him down into his teeth.

He carefully avoided the jugular, it took a while before he could break the surface of the skin. Distantly, he heard the pop of a cap, but he was too focused on creating the wound and tasting Hannibal’s blood to register it.

The exact moment the skin broke and the warm, coppery taste erupted over his tongue, he felt a cold, wet finger press at his entrance. He gasped loudly as it gently, but firmly, forced its way inside him. He’d never tried this, at least no more than curious explorations that eventually left him unsatisfied. It felt strange, he wasn’t sure whether or not he liked it until Hannibal’s finger crooked forward. His jaw loosened from Hannibal's neck as a long whine erupted from his throat unbidden.

He may have lacked experience, but he wasn’t totally clueless, and he knew enough about anatomy to know which bundle of nerves Hannibal just grazed. That still didn’t prepare him for the onslaught of pleasure that licked up his spine.

Hannibal worked another finger inside him, this time he really felt the stretch as he scissored him gently. Too gently, Will thought. They were never this soft and sweet before, this new development wouldn’t break him. He wanted to be overwhelmed with pain and pleasure, drowning in it until he couldn’t tell which way was up.

He grasped Hannibal’s hand between his legs and pushed him *deeper,* urged him to go further, *faster.*

“M-more, *please.* ” Later he was sure to be mortified, but at the moment he wasn’t above begging.

Hannibal sped up the motion of his hand, crooking his fingers and scissoring wider. The third finger slipped in between pumps and Will clenched around them, trying to get used to the new feeling but kind of hoping he never would.

He was so close to the edge already, every press of Hannibal’s fingers had him keening, he wanted to hold on for just a little longer but at this rate he’d finish in less than a minute.

The fingers withdrew, but he barely had enough time to mourn their loss before something larger and more warm pressed at his entrance.

Hannibal sank into him slowly, giving him time to adjust, but he didn’t pull out. Just fed in each mind-numbing inch gradually, but relentlessly.

He groaned, keened, and whined, nonsense noises spilled from his swollen lips that he hadn't realized he was capable of making.

“I'm c-close Hannibal I-” Two wet fingers pressed into his mouth, the taste of Hannibal's blood coating them sent him into a frenzy.

“It's-” What he was saying was interrupted by a wanton gasp, shattering the veneer of his composure. *That* was what Will wanted. “-It's alright, love.” His words were punctuated by thrusts that had lost their steady rhythm in favor of desperate need for closeness. Will attempted to meet every one. “Let go.”

Hannibal grasped him in a tight fist and that was all he needed to fall apart. His release coated his stomach and the other man's hand. The sound he made started in his chest and crescendoed from his lips in a startling cry. With a few more thrusts that had Will writhing in over-sensitivity, Hannibal followed him over the edge. The warmth spread through his gut, another consumption.

He regained his breathing after a few seconds, when he felt Hannibal about to pull out he clutched his back and dug his nails into the deep scratches he left.

“Not yet, just stay a minute. I want to feel you just a little longer.”

He stayed and clutched Will tight to him, as if they could merge into one being if they pressed together hard enough. Will wanted to lovingly scoop out his organs one by one until there was enough room for him to burrow deep in his chest and live in his warm insides, surrounded by his beautiful viscera.

He got the feeling Hannibal wouldn't mind.

Eventually, as endorphins subsided and the sticky mess became more of a priority, they parted. Hannibal cleaned the both of them with gentle care and quickly rejoined Will in bed, the rest of the evening could be dealt with later.

Chapter End Notes

btw im gonna take a little break from posting, prolly about two weeks so i can finish writing this. but then ill be back to the daily updates :3

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His students were probably less glad to have him back than Will was to be back. Alana was gracious and accommodating, she answered questions and maintained eye contact. Being a good teacher required a fair amount of social graces that Will just intrinsically lacked, but despite that, Will had missed the normalcy of his classroom.

To be entirely honest, he was also acutely nervous when he gave his first lecture upon his return. Not because of the material of course- today's was a review of the organ harvester case and the ripper's responding sounder. They'd covered the actual facts of the case previously, but now he was trying to get his students to pick up the distinct tells of a given killer. They weren't responding as well as he hoped, he'd have to once again go over the difference between pattern and design in these types of cases.

The lecture itself was easy enough, he knew the case intimately, like the flesh on the inside of his mouth, but he couldn't help the residual worry that was borne in the weeks before he was admitted.

Last time he was in this room, he'd lost two and a half hours without realizing it. He'd blinked and the classroom was dark and empty and he was still perched at his desk, ready to flip to the next slide. He kept waiting for it to happen now, but it never did. Ninety minutes after he walked in, he watched his students pack their things and file out one by one.

He heaved a sigh of relief. So much of his day-to-day life had been corrupted by the encephalitis that when it was finally gone it felt like he was living his life with cheat codes. His difficulties now revolved around maintaining eye contact and trying not to feel his students' hangovers, little problems he couldn't have imagined missing just a few months ago.

Jack walked in on him distractedly humming some classical piece Hannibal had been listening to the other night. The man was rubbing off on him.

"Glad to see you back. You seem in high spirits."

"Glad to be back. Teaching's a lot easier without a constant migraine."

"Feeling up for a profile?"

"Lead the way."

Jack side-eyed him with a suspicious expression. It was fair, Will supposed, he was never this chipper. He couldn't really give a rat's ass though, he *was* feeling good. He was finally allowed to leave his house, he hadn't had any nightmares last night, and after work he planned to spend his evening at Hannibal's.

He started humming again as Jack led him down to the lab, just because he felt like it.

The body Jack showed him wasn't entirely fresh. It smelt heavily of chemicals, it had probably been in cold storage for a few days while Jack waited for him to be cleared for active duty. He wondered what strings he had to pull, the young woman's family was probably anxious for a cremation or burial. More likely cremation, what with the status of her corpse.

The skin of her face was ripped and pulled back starting from deep cuts in her mouth that exposed a wide, gruesome smile. If Will had to guess, either a dull knife or a piece of broken glass was used.

This wasn't a typical Glasglow smile, if anything about the action could be called typical. But this particular instance was more about the process than the horrifying picture it resulted in. Cause of death was shock and blood loss, the only wounds on the body were the rough cuts on the victim's face.

"What have you got so far?"

Beverly was quick to fill him in. "Her name's Beth LeBeau, found in her own home under her bed. There was some foreign tissue at the scene, but it was so diseased we couldn't match it to any DNA samples."

The location was strange, she wasn't displayed despite the dramatic aspect of the kill itself, nor was she really hidden. The killer just left her at her place of death and fled, which meant whatever action they were trying to complete was either finished or halted when she died.

"Can I see the scene pictures?"

It was about what Will expected, there was a large bloodstain on the ground originating from under LeBeau's bed. No other signs of a struggle besides some scratches of nails on the hardwood floor, definitely from LeBeau, not her killer.

The one thing that *was* notable was the photographs of the victim's family and friends. All of their faces were scratched off, not just LeBeau's. The picture frames were busted, likely where the killer got the glass shard they used as the murder weapon.

There was something about these people, no, not the people themselves- their *faces.* The scratches on the photographs were desperate, the skin on LeBeau's face- after the initial cuts- was peeled back. Like the killer thought there was something underneath, like they thought everyone was wearing a mask.

The diseased tissue started to make sense as well. Associations were quick and relatively painless, the facts conglomerated without his loss of consciousness. It was exhilarating.

"They can't see faces. The killer has epidermolysis or leprosy or another type of severe viral infection, and its spread to their eyes. This wasn't hate or revenge, it was an act of fear. Beth LeBeau was someone very close to them and they were looking for reassurance, but got spooked when her face was missing too."

“You’re saying this was accidental?” Zeller’s doubt was hard and heavy, but Zeller was an ass so Will pushed on.

“They were trying to dig out the face they remembered. They probably didn’t even know what they were doing until LeBeau stopped moving.”

“We *did* find traces of bacteria that could indicate leprosy. The infection would have to be pretty far along for it to be impacting their vision, though. Are you sure?” Beverly pulled up her report on the tissue sample they found.

“Almost positive.” He turned to Jack. “Has anyone been back to the scene after the cleaners finished? They’re not going to want to accept the reality of what they’ve done. They might still be hanging around.”

His eyes widened just a hair. “I hope you’re right about this, Graham.” He was out of the room before Will could offer any reassurance.

Price gave him a smile almost as wide as the corpse’s. “Attaway, loverboy. Glad to have you back.” He thumped Will on the back just a tad too hard.

This wasn’t the time for praise, they hadn’t found LeBeau’s murderer yet, but he couldn’t help the pleased twitch of his lips at the agent’s approval.

He was off before Jack could make it far, they still had a killer to catch after all.

There were fresh footprints in the snow when they arrived at the home of the recently deceased. They criss-crossed from an aging storage shed, to the home itself, and a large patch of woodland on the edge of the property.

The freshest set led directly to the front door, there was no matching set leaving.

Jack pinned him to the seat with one look. “Stay here.” Will could already see the satisfied victory in his eyes.

He made a couple quick hand signals to the team he brought and they were off. They went in guns blazing, it seemed like overkill in Will’s opinion.

It couldn’t have been fifteen minutes before he saw Jack leading a very sick looking woman out of the home. Her hair was matted, her skin was an unhealthy shade of yellow, and she jerked as she walked. Immediately he could tell this was who they were looking for.

Her mindset was a mess, it hurt to sink into. It was all swirling and disjointed, like being caught in the whirlwind of a tornado, buffeted by the flying bits of houses and trees that were picked up along the way.

Killed her, dead, dying, KILLED HER, can’t see, can’t see, itchy, itchy, itchy, KILLED HER, dead, rotting, decaying, dead-

Her facial muscles didn't move, it was like she'd forgotten they could. He leaped out of the car to join the procession, at least Jack wasn't pointing a gun at her.

"What happened?"

"She was hiding under the bed, right where LeBeau was found. She didn't believe we saw her. Two of the agents had to drag her out, she tried to resist at first, but she wasn't violent. Nearly slipped out because the skin on her arm just sloughed off in one of the agent's hands. He almost vomited." Will could see the open wound on her arm where a whole layer of skin was missing. It didn't bleed, the infection halted the blood flow which caused the dead tissue in the first place.

"How'd you calm her down?"

"She kept insisting that she was dead, that we couldn't see her if she was dead. Agent Parker told her that she saw her, that she was alive and took her hand. She hasn't said anything since, and hasn't tried to resist."

She thought she was dead? That mentality wouldn't be a result of leprosy, this might be another instance of the perfect combination of physical and mental illness that created a sum much much larger than the parts. He couldn't help but relate.

"I hope you're taking her to a hospital and not down to the station. You won't get anything useful until she gets treatment."

"Way ahead of you. Parker's taking her to the nearest ER that's got the right specialists. You did good work today, Will. She won't be able to hurt herself or anyone else now."

It's late by the time they make it back to Quantico. He left Jack to the task of relaying what happened to the rest of the team and swiftly left for Baltimore. He wouldn't be able to stay the night, he still had to take care of the dogs, but he already promised he'd stay for dinner.

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Hannibal had already finished cooking, unfortunately Jack had kept him too long to enjoy teasing hip checks in the kitchen as they worked side-by-side.

"How was your day, Will? Uncle Jack kept you from me for quite a while this evening."

"We found the woman who left the Glasgow smile. Her skin was falling off, there was no blood flow to the dermal level. One of the agents grabbed her arm and the skin came off like a glove."

"Certainly worrying, but not a motive for murder. What did this killer want?"

"Reassurance, she thought she was already dead. The infection spread to her eyes, she couldn't see the face of her friend, so she got scared and lashed out. All there is to it."

"Sounds like a rather severe case of Cotard's syndrome."

“What’s that?”

“A mental illness in which a person believes they’ve died or are already dead.”

“If she was affected by that already, the leprosy cemented it. She was rotting.”

“The perfect storm of mental and physical malady.”

“It hit a little close to home.”

Hannibal finished garnishing his plate, the thinly sliced meat was complemented with fresh greens and a thick sauce drizzled artfully across.

“I imagine it was quite easy to empathize, perhaps more so than the other killers Jack shows you.”

“None of them are easy, but some are more inscrutable than others.”

“Who is your most inscrutable?”

“Are we having dinner or a session right now, Dr. Lecter?”

A coy smile danced across his thin lips as he brought a piece of meat to his mouth. Will swallowed.

“You’ll have to forgive me, but attempting to understand your mind is one of my great pleasures, though I will admit my curiosity is not at all professional.”

“Are you sure you want me to bring a killer to our table? I’ve spent a lot of time trying to get into his head, once I start it shall be difficult to get me to stop.”

“There are already two killers present, what’s one more?” Hannibal topped off his glass of Grenache- a wine he insisted went perfectly with the dark sauce- and nodded at him, his cue to call forth the ripper.

“He’s so quiet. I should have realized he and the copycat were the same killer immediately because they both never spoke. He never lets me sink into him, I only feel his displeasure whenever I get something wrong.”

“And when you get something right?”

“He preens, he doesn’t just think he’s better than everyone else, he knows it. He’s no amateur, he’s been killing longer than most people have a career. I can’t see him clearly, but I see his shadow dart around corners, and it's far closer than anyone else has gotten. I think he’s intrigued, he won’t kill me yet because he wants to know if I’m clever enough to see his face, if I’m good enough to be his equal.”

“A dangerous perception to hold, especially if he’s as prolific as you say.”

“Officially, there’s twelve bodies attributed to him, fourteen in you count the copycat’s. But I’d put the estimate closer to fifty, and that’s low-balling it. The real number is probably higher, but I doubt even he knows. He’s been doing this so long he likely lost count a while ago and the victims don’t mean enough to him that he cares to remember.”

“Where are the rest if we only see so few?”

“Under other aliases or unsolved disappearances. We only see the ones he wants us to. When he takes breaks he doesn’t stop killing, he’s just planning his next installation.”

“Have you been able to see his process? Walk through a kill as if you were him? Or is he not forthcoming enough to let you.”

“I can partially, but I can’t see the whole picture. There’s too much I don’t see to be of any use.”

“May I suggest something unconventional? I won’t presume to know your job better than you, but I might be able to help you gain a perspective you haven’t considered previously.”

“At this point I’ll try anything. What do you have in mind?”

“Walk me through the entire act, from choosing the victim to torturing, killing, and displaying them. I know you have enough insight to attempt it.”

“Which victim? There’s plenty to choose from.”

“I’d like you to pick a new one, someone he’d likely target.”

“Someone real? That's a little dark, Hannibal.” He didn't mean it really, he was excited that his lover was indulging him in this. It's been so much less painful to think about killers once he returned from the hospital, and he genuinely loved piecing together their puzzles with Hannibal, he had since their first few sessions. The doctor was the only one he could speak openly to without fear of scrutiny.

“We've considered darker topics, but we can try something else if you find it distasteful.”

“No, I want to try it.” He dug into his own head and did his best to unearth the ripper. All he had were disjointed, unconnected puzzle pieces, but they were enough to, perhaps not see the full picture, but at least glean small images.

“Have you chosen your victim?”

“Yes.” A shiver ran up his spine, starting from his tailbone. He wanted to know how far he could go, how far Hannibal would let him before it became too much.

“Who is it? How did you choose?”

“Freddie Lounds. She's been on my radar for a long time, but her usefulness no longer outweighs her rude behavior. She's humiliated me and my work one too many times, now it's my turn to humiliate her. I've considered killing her since the very first article she published

about one of my kills, before she bestowed me the title of the Chesapeake Ripper, but I'm a patient man. I do not kill because of a compulsion."

"How do you find her?"

"It only takes a few days of stalking to learn her routines. Her abrasive personality has not afforded her many friends. She's alone often, I have many opportunities to take her and no one would notice until they find my display. I grab her early in the morning before everyone else is awake. It's her last night in this hotel room, her luggage is already in her car, she signed out the evening before. She's up for a surprise interview, no one will expect her for the next few days. I can take my time."

"Tell me how you take her."

"I'm waiting for her, I strike as soon as she steps out the door. She sees my face, I might even be someone she already knows, but I'm not worried, she won't live to reveal the identity of the ripper.

It's easy to knock her unconscious, she's small and thin and I'm very practiced. I slam her head into the wall with the perfect amount of force. I don't leave a drop of blood, but she's out like a light. I haul her to my car and inject her with fentanyl to keep her unconscious until I can dispose of her vehicle and get her to my kill room. I'm efficient, all traces of her are gone in under an hour."

"Where are you taking her?"

"I'm adaptable, the art of killing fascinates me, not the process. I don't need a routine, but I have one I roughly stick to because it works well. I take her to a sterile room that only I have access to- my preferred studio. Its soundproof walls will be the last thing Freddie Lounds sees."

"How do you end her life? What tools do you use?"

"I strap her down to my work bench and clamp her jaw open. I don't have to wait long before she wakes, now I may begin.

She's a fighter, some turn immediately to begging or despair, but she thrashes. It is, of course, useless. I've designed my death trap to withstand much larger, stronger people than her. I reach for my scalpel after I don my nitrile gloves, my first target is her tongue. She's done enough speaking for this lifetime.

I turn on her recorder- another layer to my design. Her screams fill the room, they echo around with perfect acoustics, I remain utterly silent as I sever the wagging muscle. I stop the recording as her song peters out as she attempts to swallow down mouthfuls of her own blood to keep from drowning in it. Her tongue twitches in my hand.

I consider whether or not I should keep this organ or take another. I decide that I can take both, after all what's life without a little indulgence?"

“What else do you take?”

“I cut through the material of her blouse as if I’m using a letter opener. Now I can see the tears in her eyes, she can’t properly cry with her tongue gone though. I only see the bare skin of her torso as packaging, nothing more. Her skin ripples as I draw a deep cut from her collarbone to her navel. I've always loved the way blood gradually blooms from the long, deep, straight cuts of my scalpels. I peel the skin and clamp it back, exposing the muscle surrounding her ribs and diaphragm, I can see the quick beat of her heart under all the viscera.

I grab my rib spreader, stainless steel, perfectly polished, as are the rest of my tools. The pain of cracking and bending her bones is unimaginable, she finally passes out, she lasted longer than I thought she would. Her breaths are shallow and quick- her body’s last desperate attempt to keep her alive. She doesn’t stop breathing until I physically cut her lungs from her body, her heart pumps blood for a few seconds uselessly until it too realizes the body has died.

I set the lungs and tongue on ice, I will return for them soon enough, but now it's time to prepare for staging. I will wait until nightfall to transfer her body, so I load it into my walk-in cold storage area and leave my studio. I will spend the day visiting friends, catching a musical, or in the company of a lover, the more noticeably I’m seen, the better.”

“What is your design? How do you elevate Freddie Lounds?”

“When night falls, I take the body to the botanical gardens at Druid Hill Park. It's a beautiful backdrop for my piece, more beautiful than she deserves, but then again, none of my victims deserved the beauty I gave them. I’m benevolent in bestowing upon them their ascension.

Lounds was a creature of cement and cityscapes, she’s out of place here, but it's all the better- her red hair beautifully clashes with the greenery. I weave tangling vines through her ribs and around the recorder that I place in the central cavity where her lungs used to be. She’s positioned sitting upright; I admired her confidence if nothing else, so her back stays perfectly straight, but I spread her arms with grace, an aspect she’s always lacked.

I’m careful to not kill a single plant in my ministrations, the beauty here will only be enhanced if they’re allowed a few hours to grow into her. By the time I finish, she’s an ethereal vision of Gaia, inspired by Feuerbach’s work.

I take a moment to admire my finished piece, commit it to memory, and then I’m gone. I shall read about my triumph later, of course not on tattlecrime now, I’m almost a tad saddened by that fact, she really was the best at exposing my art to the public. But her Icarus flew far too close, and there must be a price for disrespect. I vanish back into my everyday life without a trace, maybe I even hop back into bed with my lover, and no one is any the wiser.”

His return to the body of Will Graham is slow, not painful or disorienting like the encephalitis made it, but it was difficult to shake off the ripper once he finally started to *see* him.

“Will?” Hannibal grasped his hand. For once, Will didn’t want to meet his eyes. “Will, are you alright?” He didn’t sound angry or horrified, he had to remind himself that Hannibal

always met him where he was, he never sought to repress any aspect of Will's personality.

"Y-yeah, I am. He's never let me go that deep before. It was hard to shake off."

"Are you in any pain?"

"No, just disoriented. To be him, god Hannibal I can't start to describe it. He lives his life with such surety, confidence, and purpose. I feel like a minnow who was put into the body of a shark, for a moment he let me feel how deeply satisfied he is with himself."

"He's detestable, but his mind offers security, a perfect acceptance of his own actions. Not something many can claim."

"Can you imagine that? Living your life without a shred of justification? It's what sets him apart from everyone else, other killers too. I said he sees his victims as pigs, but it's only partly true, he knows they're human, and he'd kill people who didn't fit the description just as readily, should he have reason to. He just…wants to, so he does it."

"It must seem so novel coming from a man who has denied himself his base wants for so long." Hannibal's thumb rubbed across the back of his hand. Will intertwined their fingers and gave a quick squeeze, the contact never failed to calm him.

"You said before that I was the one who kept surprising you, but I think you've got it backwards. Even when I admit I like being inside the mind of the most dangerous killer I've ever come across, you still accept me."

"Have I given you any reason to believe I wouldn't? I've told you before, Will, I enjoy every aspect of you, even the parts the rest of the world would foolishly shame you for having."

The rest of their meal passed easily, Hannibal had given him a lot to consider regarding the ripper. There were so many more details to his personality and design that had become clear, he'd need time to process it.

Hannibal insisted that he take care of the dishes so Will could get home at a decent hour, he still had his dogs to take care of. He ached when they parted at his front door.

Will wondered if it was too early for them to move in together.

Chapter End Notes

why do i get sick at least once a month oogh

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The week following was blissfully slow. After the incident involving Georgia Madchen- he'd found out the sick woman's name the day after they'd taken her to the hospital- no new killer immediately popped up to take her place. It was rare that a case was this open and shut, with this few loose ends floating around.

Will was settling into a routine that, while he knew wouldn't last as soon as the next killer showed up, still relaxed him greatly. He and Hannibal had found the time to visit Abigail twice that week and they spent more nights sleeping in each other's company than they did apart. Hannibal had even taken to packing him lunches whenever they spent the morning together.

He got the feeling that if he could, Hannibal would restrict Will's diet to only food that he prepared. Obviously he didn't mind, it was always delicious, and it made him smile to see how extravagant Hannibal could make a sandwich.

Alana found him on his lunch break in between lectures partway through the week. He could tell her mouth was watering when she spied the spread Will had in front of him. Hannibal called it a 'Croque Monsieur with a black krim tomato and sow's blood reduction.' He'd probably get annoyed if he heard Will calling it grilled cheese and tomato soup, but if he didn't want Will calling it that, he shouldn't have made grilled cheese and tomato soup.

"Well I know you definitely didn't make that." She approached his desk with a soft smile, he didn't detect any lingering tension in her open body language.

"Damn, is it that obvious? And here I thought I really gave off the 'gourmet chef' vibe." She laughed indulgently, Will was glad for it. She'd been avoiding him ever since he left the hospital and the few times she visited were short and awkward. It was obvious that she hadn't really known how to address…well, everything.

"Not quite. Is your next class soon?"

"I've got an hour. You were teaching all last week, you probably know the schedule just as well as I do." She shrugged one shoulder, a vague agreement.

"I wanted to…apologize for how I responded while you were in the hospital. And also before that, I suppose."

"There's nothing to apologize for. I certainly wasn't on my best behavior either."

"Perhaps not, but I wanted to swing by anyways. You're clearly doing better though."

“I am. I really am.” He smiled down into the meal that was lovingly prepared for him that morning. “It still doesn’t feel real sometimes.”

“I’m not totally used to the fact that you and Hannibal are soulmates either. I knew him for quite a few years before you came along, he always seemed above it, I guess. But I think it makes sense if it's you, you both have this quiet intensity. I suppose I didn’t realize how similar you were until I took a step back.”

“Beverly said the same thing.” He huffed out a quick puff of air that maybe could be considered a laugh by the loosest of definitions.

“He was your therapist, I guess that explains the size of it, right?” To be honest, Will hadn’t really considered the size since he realized his soulmate wasn’t the ripper. He’d been so confident at the time, he felt it in his gut. But evidence trumps gut feelings, and being a therapist and patient was certainly a distinct hurdle to overcome.

“I think so. I can’t imagine it would be anything else. He’s…very sweet, you wouldn’t expect it.”

“It’s hard to think of Hannibal and sweet existing in the same sentence, but I’ll just have to take your word for it. I am happy for you though, both of you. If anyone gives you a hard time, let me know okay?” Unfortunately she was probably talking more along the lines of office homophobes, not overly nosy reporters. Not much she could do on the Lounds front anyways, but her support was welcome.

“I will, thanks.” She beamed at him, wide and sunny. It was nice to have her in his corner again, though he now firmly realized that his initial desires regarding her would have never panned out. This was better, less pressure to be seen as perfectly stable and desirable, he could simply enjoy her company.

She didn't have the easy quiet of Hannibal's presence, her mind made far too much noise- she was always analyzing and drawing her own conclusions- for him to be entirely at ease around her, but he'd missed her friendship.

She took her leave shortly after, the soup had gone cold, but it was still delicious.

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The quiet would only last until the next body dropped, Will knew that. But whatever he was expecting wasn’t as dramatic as what occurred.

Jack found him in case storage. He told himself he was in there to review some cold cases, get some insight with the downtime, but he couldn’t help but gravitate towards the numerous ripper files.

There was always something so unique about his kills. Will obviously couldn’t say he appreciated them, they were horrifying above all else, but they were so artful and littered with hidden depth that he couldn’t stay away, especially after his dinner with Hannibal.

When Jack stormed in with the force of a hurricane, Will slammed the folder shut like a teenager caught looking at porn. Jack just raised an unimpressed eyebrow before launching into what he wanted to say.

“Abel Gideon escaped his transport vehicle an hour ago. He killed three men in the process. We haven’t gotten anyone on the scene yet, but apparently it's pretty gruesome. You coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Gruesome how?” Will fell in line with Jack’s quick steps as he led them out of the building.

“Ripper-esque. Organs everywhere.”

“Not missing? The ripper usually takes trophies.” There was still something off about that phrasing. The Chesapeake Ripper wasn’t so gauche as to have a display room for all his conquests. Will couldn’t help but think that whatever he was doing with them was temporary, he didn’t value any of his victims enough to want to keep them.

“That’s why you’re coming. We need to know what Gideon’s goal is and who he’s going after next.”

“I’ll do what I can.” He piled into the cruiser, the team followed close behind in Beverly’s beat-up jeep.

Jack wasn’t joking about the organs, they were strewn about the scene like party streamers. Definitely not a ripper original, but to anyone who’d analyzed his works, there was a recognizable inspiration.

Most of the major organs of the three bodies were hung in the trees, their branches barren in the winter climate. Perfect hangers for the veins the organs hung from.

Upon closer inspection, he could see some trauma near the corner of all the victims’ right eye. The eye itself wasn’t removed, nor did anything appear to be shaved inside.

He squatted down in order to be eye level with the man who was apparently the driver. With one gloved hand he pulled down the lid to examine the broken skin near the socket more closely.

It looked like something long and thin was shoved inside, deep into the skull.

It was a lobotomy.

He sank into Gideon’s skin and felt the thin piece of metal in his hand. The man propped against the tree wasn’t dead, he’d just choked him into unconsciousness. That was good, the ripper was a sadist, *Gideon* was a sadist. He wanted them to feel the pain as he killed them, didn’t he? That was what gave him satisfaction, right?

He was so *confused* but bodies would help, the bodies of the people that did this to him. It's only fair that he scrambled them like they scrambled him.

Will's return to reality wasn't painless, but it was easier than he came to expect. He was still in the same spot as when he went under, he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"So, does Abel Gideon still believe he's the Chesapeake Ripper?" He had regained enough awareness of his surroundings to not jump at Jack's presence.

"He's having a difference of opinion about who he is." Gideon wanted to be the ripper, he craved that strong, solid mindset. Will could sympathize, obviously he didn't want to go around killing people and making art with their corpses, but the ripper knew himself intimately. He accepted his own darkness, he had no delusions about what he was, no moral misgivings about his deeds, wouldn't anyone want that much surety in their actions?

"Will he kill again? We already know he's heading back to Baltimore, but why? What's waiting for him there?"

"He'll try. He thinks he can unscramble his own brain by scrambling the brains of those who did this to him. I think he's going to go after his attending psychiatrists and doctors. If I were you I'd get someone to keep an eye on Chilton." Or not. Chilton was an asshole, Will kind of hoped he'd turn up gutted in the next few days.

"What about the organs? Why still imitate the ripper?"

"The ripper's a type of…stability for him. Something to cling to. He's not going to find the ripper in himself, but the real ripper might find him instead. He's still not happy about the copycat murder and this parody is just going to piss him off more." As always, the ripper in Will's mind didn't speak, but Will could tell he was fuming, though pleased at Will's deduction. It was off putting, most killers didn't feel gratified when he started to figure them out.

"As if finding Gideon wasn't our top priority before." Jack stalked off to give orders to the other agents milling about, leaving Will stranded on the snowy bank. There was still a lot of evidence to be processed and a semi fresh trail of footprints to follow. It would be a long day.

———

She hated every single one of these people.

All of the patients spoke like scared little girls, they allowed their trauma to embody them and they fed off the fragility of each other. They were *weak.*

Prey, her hindbrain thought.

The doctors and nurses were worse though, they treated her like a child, she couldn't stand all the blatant pity. She may have detested the patients, but the caregivers made her feel rage, sharp and deadly, the kind that was a precursor to 'spontaneous' violence.

One of the particularly condescending nurses poked her head into Abigail's room. "You have a visitor, sweetie."

She hated the nickname, the nurse hadn't earned the right to address her with affection. She couldn't conceive what Abigail was capable of, so the only thing she deserved was a miniscule grunt.

A man stepped into her room, the nurse shot him a stink eye- they always frowned upon having male visitors.

"Hannibal, I wasn't expecting you today!" She was excited to see him, but her juvenile enthusiasm was feigned. It was mostly to get back at the nurse that Abigail didn't even bother to look up at when she entered her room.

Hannibal was one of the two people who didn't treat her like a fragile porcelain doll or a criminal, so she enjoyed his company immensely, along with the escape from this place he offered.

"I wanted to surprise you. I have a gift at my home I believe you'll enjoy." She hopped from her bed and immediately followed him out of the stuffy room. Not a single glance was spared for the nurse.

"Is it Will? It's not a surprise if it's Will, I see him almost as much as I see you." Not that she would mind if it was. Will cared for her deeply, it was obvious, but he also respected her too much to mince his words. She thought he saw himself in her, she noticed how he winced whenever the nurses spewed their placating, condescending words.

"Uncle Jack has demanded Will's time for the day, so unfortunately you just get me." She hooked her hand into the crook of his arm, a habit they developed since his very first visit.

Hannibal was a large man, not necessarily physically, though he certainly was tall. His presence was large, it filled up whatever space he was in. He probably was the only person that could make the huge sterile house he lived alone in seem full.

Her father was meek and shied away from the spotlight. She had loved him, yes, even at his most wicked, but she resented the quiet affectation he took. It seemed that the least he could do if he was going around killing and cannibalizing girls was look her in the eye as he slit her throat. She found solace in the confidence Hannibal Lecter exuded, not just his own, but the confidence he had in her.

He saw strength in her, resilience. He didn't try to make her forget the last eighteen years of her life, he encouraged her to feel it deeply and use what she learned to fortify herself, like the hard carapace of a beetle.

She held out her hand as they neared the Bentley, he side-eyed her with one raised brow, but still relented. The keys dropped into her hand and she excitedly hopped in the front seat, caressing the soft leather of the wheel covering.

He allowed her to take control over the radio, she turned it to one of his classical stations anyway.

“This is the second time you've gotten me out of there in a week, they're not gonna like that.”

“You're an adult and not their prisoner. They have little say where you willingly go and with whom you leave.”

“Clearly you’ve never been institutionalized, it's basically the same as being a prisoner.”

“Not yet anyway.” He didn’t laugh, he never did unless Will was around, but his lip quirked, which was close enough.

“When are you getting me out of there? I feel like if I have to spend another month in that place I really will turn into the killer Agent Crawford thinks I am.”

“You could never be the killer he thinks you are, he believes you’d follow in your father’s footsteps.”

“You don’t? I still killed someone.”

“A desperate action, I doubt your next will be so impulsive.”

“My next? You think I’ll kill someone else?”

“I know what you’re capable of and that there are many people who seek to hurt you. That is all.”

She fell silent, there wasn’t anything to say anyway. How could she admit that she was as flattered as she was horrified?”

Her life hadn’t been her own in years, if it had ever been. She understood violence, the selfishness of taking a life was something she lived with every day. Abigail had no delusions about her morality, she was destined for hell, there was no doubt in her mind.

She changed the station to some well-known oldies, the words helped distract her mind better than flowing chamber music.

Hannibal led her into her room. In the corner near the large window that faced the back garden, was an easel. A stack of stretched canvases of different sizes leaned against it. On her desk were pads of thick paper and several sets of pristine tubes of paint, upon closer inspection she could see acrylics, oils, watercolors, even some pastels, charcoal, and a full set of pencils ranging from 9B to 9H.

She ran her fingers along the supplies, tried to envision how she'd turn them into something beautiful. In the past, she was taught that everything she made had to be useful or it would be a waste of the raw materials. But Hannibal’s entire lifestyle was one of lavish indulgence, maybe she could take a page out of his book.

“Will you teach me how to draw?”

“Certainly, though I’m sure you’re anxious to make your own creations.”

“I am, but I still want you to show me.”

“Very well.” He grabbed a few sheets of the paper and arranged two spots on her desk.

They spent the afternoon in relative quiet, focused on the figures Hannibal was helping her draw. He didn’t start from ovals and guidelines, his hand moved like a printer, starting from one side and gradually working his way towards the other with a mostly clear image in its wake.

He sharpened her pencils with his scalpel when they became dull. The whetted edge was so close to his thumb, but he used the tool with practiced ease, like an extension of himself. It wouldn’t dare cut him.

After two large pages of rough sketches, he rose from his spot beside her.

“I have one more gift for you Abigail, if you’ll excuse me for a moment.”

He left and quickly returned bearing a pen and a packet of stapled papers. She could see it was densely covered in legalese.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Indeed, my guardian status has been approved, all that is left is your signature.”

“So if I just sign this, I can stay here? I won’t have to go back?”

“Indeed. You may come and go as you please, use the space as you wish, and find harbor from Jack’s scrutiny. I shall also fund any schooling you wish to seek out.”

Hannibal cared for her, she knew that, but he wasn’t as self-sacrificial as his partner. There had to be something he was getting out of all of this.

“What’s the catch?” His little smirk told her she hit the nail on the head.

“I simply expect you to defend our way of life when the time comes. Will believes himself to be your protector, but there are actions he will not take that are necessary for our survival. It is not the way of nature to allow prey to terrorize predator, you have experience dealing with unruly prey.”

He watched her with a certain intensity, of course nothing could be gleaned from his expression besides mild amusement, but there was something lurking underneath, like a shark circling silently under the black surface of the ocean at midnight.

“You want me to kill.” The hook in her hand felt visible, tangible, as if she molded the iron in her blood into a sharp blade. She didn’t hate the feeling, it made her feel strong, in control.

Hannibal cocked his head like a curious big cat, but did not disagree.

“You have plenty of experience killing, I’ve seen the inside of your father’s cabin, half those trophies were yours, weren’t they? You were so proud of them too, you certainly were when you killed for our supper.”

“That’s different. You want *murder* .”

“Is it truly murder if they are not your equals? You would be doing the world a favor by swatting the pests.”

She took a second to really look at him. His hair was perfectly coiffed, his suits prim and pressed, but his fingers rested far too near the scalpel on her desk. He donned the most brightly colored disguise possible, his strangeness was always written off as eccentricity, but she now saw how calculated it all was.

“Will said you hunted, but you don’t, do you? At least not in the way he thinks.”

His expression didn’t change, except perhaps to show more amusement. “Clever girl.”

Strangely, she wasn’t scared. She should be, but he already laid out his expectations, no harm would come to her if she accepted his terms.

“How many people have you killed?” Her voice was soft, she didn’t expect her question to be heard or answered.

“Many more than your father.”

“Are you…like him? You do it so you won’t kill the people you care about?”

“There are many reasons to take a life, but I assure you, I am nothing like your father.”

This was what he was offering, either she accepted him and joined him at the top of the food chain, or be left to rot and fester at the very bottom. The choice was easy. He’d teach her how to be free of her fear, how to live without guilt, and how to take what she coveted.

She wasn’t prey, she’d never be that scared little girl living under her father’s thumb again.

“Will you show me this too? Until I can do it myself?”

“You do not need as much guidance as you believe. You are already a part of the pride, Abigail, but I will help you cull the herds until you are safe from poachers.”

In a steady, confident hand, she signed the document. Each letter of ‘Abigail Hobbs’ was perfectly clear and legible, there would be no mistaking her decision.

He clasped a firm hand on her shoulder, squeezed lightly, and left her to her drawings. She expected to feel the shift inside her, but she felt no different. Perhaps she’d shifted a long time ago and this is where she was always meant to end up.

She picked up her pencil and went back to the page, her own lines were flowy and abstract where his were straight and anatomically correct. She wasn't turning into him, she was her own monster, it was the sweetest realization she'd had in months.

Chapter End Notes

either love abigail or die by my sword

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack called him in early that morning, he didn't have time to do much more than feed the dogs and let them out before he had to leave, lest he tempt Jack's ire. Instead of Quantico, he met him outside the office door of one Dr. Paul Carruthers where his corpse sat wide-eyed at his own desk.

This was Abel Gideon's work, it certainly fit the M.O.- Carruthers wrote an article a while back describing Gideon as a 'pathological narcissist who suffers from psychotic episodes.' Not entirely false, hopefully he got some satisfaction from being proved right.

This kill, while serving Gideon's need for retribution, also spoke distinctly of the ripper, even more so than the previous bodies he left. He was peacocking, showing how well he killed in order to get the more experienced killer's attention. He wanted the ripper to tell him who he was since he couldn't figure it out himself, but there was no way he would be so merciful. If Gideon found him, he would die, no question about it.

That being said, the ripper would probably enjoy this little letter of introduction. There was a lot of technical skill involved along with a darkly humorous twist that the ripper loved to imbue in his own pieces. It was perhaps a bit more overt in its intended message than how the ripper preferred to conduct his scenes, but it was evocative- the tongue pierced through the neck to resemble a tie, the connected IVs, the careful positioning of his unblinking eyes- left a gruesome but composite image. The cooler containing the blood prepped for donation was the cherry on top, the little xoxo at the bottom of the poem Gideon had written for the other killer. Will would have laughed if it wasn't so inappropriate.

Carruthers' finger was resting on his computer mouse, it was incongruous with the rest of the piece. Will clicked it using the dead man's finger and his laptop's screen lit up revealing a tattlecrime article featuring the body Will was touching.

"How is this news already?" Jack peered over his shoulder to get a good look at the image.

"Someone from the Baltimore PD must've taken a picture with their phone and sold it to tattlecrime."

Jack cut Zeller off before he could continue. "The photo was taken before the blood was put on ice." It was clear in the image that the IV was still hooked up to Carruthers, the blood bag was full and his skin had only just lost the flushed sheen on life. It wasn't the gray that Will saw in front of him.

"He has Freddie Lounds." If they were lucky, she'd already be dead by the time they found her. It wasn't a moral thought, but he didn't have to justify it to anyone when it was contained within his own head. His inner ripper was purring.

It took a few hours to get everything examined and tagged, but eventually they ended up back at Quantico with Carruthers' body primed on the dissection table. Price had barely made the first cuts when Will's phone rang.

"Graham speaking."

"Chilton didn't show up for work this morning." Jack had split from the group to obtain the whereabouts of all of Gideon's previous psychiatrists; apparently the search yielded results.

"Any leads?"

"None at the moment, but stay sharp. I'll let you know as soon as we have anything." Jack hung up without a sign off.

Before he could pocket his phone, it rang again. He was much more pleased to see the caller ID this time.

"Hey Hannibal." He couldn't school his fond tone and expression, Price snorted.

"Hello, Will. I hoped to surprise you with lunch today, provided you forgot your own, but it seems you are not in your classroom." He did forget it actually, he'd been in such a rush that he'd skipped breakfast too. Only at Hannibal's offer did he realize how hungry he was.

"I'm down in the lab, no classes today."

"Working still on Gideon's unfortunate transporters?"

"Not quite. He left a new body, it's up on tattlecrime if you want to see."

"I think I'll refrain from giving that website more traffic than it has already. Do I have clearance to come down?"

"If Lounds got to see it then I don't see why you can't. You're not squeamish, are you, doctor?"

"Not particularly, they train that out of you in medical school. I'll see you shortly, Will."

"See you soon."

Beverly punched him in the arm as soon as he ended the call. "I know you're head over heels, but quit grinning at the body. The other lab techs are gonna think you lost it."

He did his best to school his expression into something more neutral, at least until Hannibal showed up. Beverly just rolled her eyes and went back to combing the bloodied fabric of the lab coat the doctor was found in.

He didn't hear Hannibal's footsteps as he arrived, but he sensed his presence at the lab entrance nonetheless. They lingered just outside so their conversation would at least have the

veneer of privacy.

“It seems you’ve had a hectic morning.”

“Extremely, Jack called before the sun was up.”

“I assume you neglected to pack a lunch then. Did you even have breakfast this morning?”

“You know me too well.”

“In this one regard, I wish I didn’t.” He directed Will down to the benches outside the lab, he didn’t think he could keep his appetite inside anyway- the preservative chemicals never failed to make him slightly woozy.

Will gave him a quick rundown of the case so far as they ate, Hannibal hooked one of his feet around Will’s ankle, a subtle but appreciated contact.

“I wanted to inform you-” He was interrupted by the shrill sound of Will’s ringtone. Jack’s name flashed across the screen- he wouldn’t be calling again so soon if he didn’t have any new information.

“Figure out where he took Lounds and Chilton?”

“Not yet, but we got another body, same as the first. Tell the team to meet me outside in five minutes.”

“Will do.” He didn’t feel tired or drained, he felt jittery with anticipation. This new body didn’t inspire anxiety, he was almost excited to see it, though he’d rather not disclose that fact with anyone.

“Everything all right?” Hannibal asked as Will burst up from his seat, he’d only gotten through half his lunch.

“They found another body, Jack’s expecting us.”

“Then we best not keep him waiting.”

The body of Dr. Carson Nahn was displayed very similarly to Carruthers’ but his blood wasn’t on ice, it was just missing, along with one arm below the elbow. He was another psychiatrist, he interviewed Gideon for a survey a few years back. Alana had his exact same status in relation to Gideon, Jack immediately sent her a security detail. Hopefully the killer wouldn’t have time to make another stop tonight.

“Abel Gideon didn't kill this man.” It only took one look for Will to know.

Hannibal was lingering near the severed arm, he probably could tell how the cut was made- it looked surgical after all. Jack had insisted that he come when he saw him trailing behind his agents, another expert could only help after all.

“Why do you say so?” Jack was looking at him with mild suspicion, he’d been confident that this was the work of the killer they were trying to track.

“Have you ever gotten your blood drawn? It takes a while Jack, a lot longer if you’re draining the whole body. He wouldn’t have time to put together two scenes and kidnap both Lounds and Chilton. This is the work of the man he’s peacocking for.”

“The ripper did this?”

“It’s his response, he’s letting you know where to find him. Tell me, where was the last place you saw a severed arm?”

———

Hannibal was able to talk his way into tagging along to the observatory as well, of course he wasn’t allowed to go inside with the initial charge though. It amused him greatly that his status was still a civilian- one that needed protecting.

Unfortunate that he wouldn’t get to see Gideon’s gift, he’d been so gracious with them so far.

He watched as Will left the Bentley to join the charge, finally fully cleared for armed active duty.

“Just wait here, I’ll be back soon.” He took Hannibal’s hand in his own and squeezed it reassuringly. Hannibal wasn’t worried, Gideon wasn’t a fighter, with this many people he’d surrender without hassle. But this was a ritual important for Will, he’d never had someone waiting for him before, someone to return from the darkness to, so Hannibal squeezed back, happy knowing he was fostering something deeper.

If his hand felt empty at the loss of contact, it failed to be relevant. He wanted Will to blossom into his becoming, and to do that he needed the man to depend on him fully. Obviously, the feeling wasn't reciprocated, he had more control over himself than to allow it. It would make him too vulnerable.

He was a monster in a person suit, he reminded himself, and monsters were not capable of love.

Will followed closely behind Jack as the team made their way into the observatory. Less than a minute later, he noticed movement around the back of the building. It was only a slight shift in the moonlight, he wouldn’t have noticed if he had the eyes of a normal man.

Immediately, he left the relative safety of his car, never one to let an opportunity slip by. He quickly made his way towards the treeline that Gideon slinked into, careful to keep his steps silent even with the crunch of the snow underfoot. He made sure to cover his tracks as he went.

The moonlight was shrouded by the overhead canopy, plunging the forest into a cold darkness. If his sense of smell wasn’t so keen, he would have lost Gideon in the thicket of trees.

As it was, he could easily track him. He was especially keen to the smell of blood and Gideon reeked of it, he must've left quite the gift in the observatory.

He drew closer and eventually heard the subtle stumbling of the escaped convict. It took him back to his younger days, those first few kills in quick succession. He'd stalked them through the wintery woods surrounding the Lecter estate, in his entire childhood he'd never felt more motivated, *alive* as he did then.

This would be the type of hunt that Will would enjoy intimately, his skills at tracking would give him a pronounced edge.

Hannibal couldn't help but wonder at his own desire to expose Will to this act that resembled one of his deepest, most guarded memories so closely. He didn't want to trust the other man, he didn't want to trust anybody, not with this. But he already had revealed part of the experience, albeit in veiled, safe anecdotes.

He'd have to consider it another time. The scent of blood had blended with steel, gasoline, and asphalt- he couldn't let Gideon get away now.

He exited the treeline right as the getaway car's engine revved to life. It was easy to slip into the backseat unnoticed.

Gideon's back stiffened, quick as if he was struck by lightning.

"I was expecting the Chesapeake ripper. Unless you are him?"

"It's a shame I couldn't stay to see your gift, but three's already a crowd, wouldn't you say, Abel? I would have hated for our little get together to be dulled by the company you chose to bring."

"I wouldn't have minded you breaking a few of my toys. I'm a reasonable man Mr…?"

" *Dr* . Lecter," he corrected. "And I don't care to break something that still has use."

"Apologies then. If it's any consolation, a skilled surgeon should be able to put our friend back together. I haven't been in prison for so long that I've forgotten everything from med school." Hannibal wished he could've seen the fruit of Gideon's labors, he'd wanted to pull Chilton apart since the day he met him.

"I won't waste your time with pleasantries, Abel. You want something, I can give it to you." His Adam's apple bobbed with a pronounced swallow. Hannibal could see the desperate hope shine in his eyes, though it was only visible in the rearview mirror.

"I hope that's a medical degree, doctor. My track record with therapists leaves me a tad hesitant to accept psychiatric help."

"Unfortunately, you have not gotten so lucky this evening, but we rarely find the help we truly need from expected sources."

“Is that what you want? To help me?” Gideon was wonderfully malleable, it would be easy to manipulate his compliance along with his rage. His spur of the moment plan might come to fruition yet.

“Of course, it is my job after all. Now, this is hardly the ideal setting for our discussion. Wouldn’t you prefer something a bit further from prying eyes?”

He led Gideon towards the dining room upon their arrival to his home. Abigail called from ahead as they drew closer.

“Hannibal? Is someone here?”

Gideon quirked an eyebrow in his direction, which was ignored as he swept into the room.

Abigail had been drawing at his kitchen table, rough sketches of bucks, does, and girls with long hair lay scattered around. A small wastebasket full of pencil shavings was positioned at her feet. There was a scalpel perched near her arsenal of pencils and a bandage on her thumb. She’d been at this a while.

“Abigail, this is my acquaintance, Dr. Abel Gideon. Abel, this is my charge, Ms. Abigail Hobbs. Please make yourself comfortable while I prepare supper.” He looked like he wanted to protest- it was never smart to let a killer out of your sight of course- but his need to please the ripper won out. He sat himself at the head of the table and forcibly relaxed his posture. “Abigail, if you would help me in the kitchen, please?”

Chapter End Notes

just watched the finale again for like the third time this week and like, it's never not gonna make me crazyinsane

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will tried calling him for the seventh time in a half hour. This time instead of ringing, it went straight to voicemail. " *You've reached the private line of Dr. Hanniba-"* he hung up in frustration.

An anxious thought gripped him, Freddie had said that Abel Gideon had only just departed when they charged into the observatory. If he got to Hannibal first, then this impersonal recording might be the last he heard of his voice.

He'd been an officer since he was 19 and had worked in homicide since he was 22, he knew how instances like these typically ended. He didn't know what he would do if he found Hannibal disemboweled like Chilton or worse, displayed like Carruthers. The bile that crawled up his throat tasted like blood.

"Will?" Beverly announced her presence before she laid a hand on his shoulder, as gentle as she could. He still flinched, hard. "We'll get him, okay?"

"You don't know that. Hannibal could already be…" As much as he tried to acknowledge the very real possibility, he couldn't get the words out.

He pulled at his shirt collar to look down at his own chest. The mark didn't seem any fainter than the last time he checked, but it was hard to tell in the night time darkness. His ears were ringing, he could barely hear Beverly's reassurances. He had to move, he had to read the scene, do *anything* to figure out where the hell Gideon had taken him.

His phone rang, he barely read Abigail's name before he pressed it to his ear.

"Will? Will there's a man here," Her voice was rushed and panicked, but entirely steady. If he wasn't so on edge that would've raised suspicion, but at the moment, it didn't register. "He has a gun, I was able to get away for a second but Hannibal's still in there with him!"

"Where are you?"

"Hannibal's home. I have to go, I think he noticed me." The line went dead before he could say another word. His body moved before he was consciously aware of it.

The keys of the Bentley were still in the ignition, he didn't think twice before he hopped in the driver's seat.

Hannibal was still *alive* . He wasn't too late yet, but he might be by the time he got there. He wanted to push the speed limit even further, but roads were slick in winter, he couldn't afford to slip off the road again.

Less than five minutes after he left the scene in a frenzy, he got another call; he pressed it to his ear without taking his eyes off the road.

“Will! Where are you?!” Jack yelled into the receiver.

“Gideon took Hannibal to his home. He’s got Abigail too, I’m on my way over now.”

“Not without the team you’re not! Pull over now, we have to regroup.”

“He could kill them if they’re not already dead! I’m not stopping Jack, just send the team after me.”

“Will-” He hung up before Jack could try to convince him further, he wouldn’t be stopping until his family was safe.

The drive from the observatory to Chandler Street was supposed to take at least thirty minutes; Will’s foot was lead on the pedal, but it was still the longest quarter hour of his life. His phone buzzed constantly in the passenger seat, but Hannibal’s and Abigail’s names never flashed across the screen, so he didn’t pick it up.

As much as he just wanted to drive up as close as he could, it could alert Gideon to his presence and make him act out of startled desperation. He parked half a block down away and crept quickly down the street, gun drawn. Thankfully, Hannibal’s front door was unlocked, it swung silently on its hinges.

He heard voices coming from the direction of the dining room, no signs of a struggle though- he might have gotten here in time.

Will tried to keep his steps light but each one sounded like claps of thunder, he didn’t have Hannibal’s ghostly silent tread.

“- getting along so well, Dr. Lecter, but you just had to-” Will heard Gideon cut himself off as soon as he entered the room. He had both Hannibal and Abigail backed into the corner of the dining room, a gun trained on Hannibal’s head. “It seems we have company.”

“Put down the gun, Gideon.”

“Hello to you too, Mr. Graham. I don’t believe you’re the one in any position to make demands of me, though.” He waved the gun just a tad closer to Hannibal’s head, his responding flinch was hard and pronounced. Abigail seemed to shrink further behind his back. “How about you put down *your* gun. I don’t actually need two hostages.” Abigail’s eyes widened and Will could see where she clutched Hannibal’s overcoat, the scar on her neck was uncovered.

Hannibal stayed solid, a pillar of strength for the three of them even with a gun trained on his forehead.

Will didn’t have a choice, the bullet would pierce Hannibal’s skull before he’d be able to react, and Gideon was clearly itching to pull the trigger.

Reluctantly, he pointed the gun up, away from Gideon.

“Smart man. Now set it on the table and slide it over and no one has to lose their head.”

It was only then that Will noticed the contents of the dining table. Thick sheets of drawing paper contained rough sketches of stylized deer and wide-eyed girls. Surrounding was an arsenal of at least twenty drawing pencils and a scalpel slipped in between.

“Hurry up, Graham. You know how I feel about psychiatrists.” He quickly slid the FBIs firearm across the solid oak. He watched carefully for the moment that Gideon’s eyes left him in order to track the gun. In a swift, subtle movement, he snatched the scalpel as he retracted his hand and slipped it into the sleeve of his jacket, careful not to disturb the pencils surrounding.

Gideon kept his own gun trained on Hannibal while he retrieved Will’s. “You were so righteous when I met you, Will. Can I call you Will? I wonder if you’d be so motivated to save him if you knew what he gets up to in his free time. Get over here, I want to see your face when I shatter the illusion.”

“Gideon-” Hannibal started.

“You’ve talked quite enough for tonight, doctor. If you played nice a little bit longer, he might’ve gotten the drop on me.” Will walked forward, his steps purposeful and undisguised, he was just doing what Gideon asked, after all. “You were supposed to *help* me, but I guess you’re just another bastard psychiatrist above all else. But I suppose you can still help me, maybe I’ll get my mind back if I kill the real thing.”

Gideon was only an arm’s length away, all Will needed now was a second of opportunity, just one tiny opening. He slipped the scalpel into his palm.

“I wonder who this monster is to you, Will Graham. You were desperate enough to come alone.” His eyes dropped to the undone buttons on his shirt and the exposed skin beneath. A self-satisfied smirk crossed his face. “Now *that* is interesting, I didn’t think men like us got soulmates, Dr. Lecter. Why don’t you sate my curiosity for me, huh?”

He hesitated, Hannibal’s sure hands stilled and his body stiffened.

“C’mon, c’mon show me. I haven't got all day.” Hannibal’s hands drifted to his collar, it enraged Will- this bond they had was supposed to be private, *sacred,* but everyone just couldn’t leave it alone.

Despite his anger, it gave him the moment he needed. Gideon’s focus faltered as he watched Hannibal undo the top button of his dress shirt and his index finger relaxed on the trigger for just a breath. He clenched the scalpel with the tip facing skyward in a closed fist and drove it into the long tendon that ran the length of Gideon’s forearm, near the wrist. Hannibal moved at the same time; he grabbed Abigail and high-tailed her out of Gideon’s range of fire.

The gun was still in his hand but the severing of the tendon made him flinch away from the trigger rather than squeeze.

He howled in pain, more of an animal than a human sound. Will yanked the scalpel back and released a rush of blood and immediately slashed again, this time he got Gideon in the opposite shoulder, leaving a long clean gash. He was able to knock the gun out of the killer's hand in the moment of pain and confusion. It scattered harmlessly across the floor.

"You *imbecile,* you have no idea who you're protecting!"

Gideon wasn't a small man, he hit with the force of a bull. He tucked in his bad hand and rammed into Will with his good shoulder, sending him to the ground, crashing through one of the dining chairs.

He was about to jump on Will's prone form when Hannibal's fists, one wrapped around the other, dropped onto his head with the force of a hammer. He stumbled to the ground, though he didn't fall unconscious, but it gave Will an opportunity to strike once again.

He drove the scalpel into Gideon's neck before the man could regain his footing, and yanked it out in a jagged, jerky motion. A thick river of bright red blood spilled from the gash directly onto Will's arm and face. Gideon tried desperately to clench at and gulp air into his gaping throat, but ultimately the cut had severed his airway and a few major arteries.

It was less than a minute before his chest stopped moving. There was a heady ecstasy thick in Will's veins as he watched the man bleed out and choke to death. He clenched the scalpel hard, he wanted to cut him up *more,* to feel the rush that tearing into the man gave him, sealing his fate.

Hannibal gently pulled him to his feet, no longer eye-level with the cooling corpse.

"Is he dead?" Abigail's voice came from behind him.

He nodded mutely. She smiled at him, it wasn't sad or scared, just relieved. His hand intertwined with Hannibal's that still rested on his shoulder.

Hannibal showcased his movements clearly as he removed the scalpel from Will's fist, gentle as anything. More gentle than a man who just killed someone, and enjoyed it thoroughly, deserved.

As adrenaline gradually leaked from his system, relief replaced it. Hannibal and Abigail were *safe,* and the fact that he was the one to guarantee their safety brought a heavy satisfaction deep in his bones, more potent than the rush he got from cracking a killer's skull open and understanding what made them click.

Was it defending his little family that gave him that flood of endorphins? Or was it the fact he had taken another life? Hannibal may claim that they all were killers, but Will was sure that he was the only one who truly felt raw satisfaction from seeing his own appendage coated in blood.

Will didn't notice he was retreating inward until Hannibal folded him into his waiting arms, he went boneless and slipped his arm into the other man's overcoat. He didn't seem to mind the blood that would surely stain his cream-colored shirt.

Loud footsteps echoed down the hallway, at least five distinct cadences- his backup must've arrived. He reluctantly extracted himself from Hannibal's secure hold.

If he'd chosen to wait for them, his family would surely be dead.

Jack stormed in first, gun drawn. His eyes first were drawn to Will's bloodied form, then Gideon's corpse, still spilling blood onto the hardwood.

"What happened here?" His voice was hard and accusatory.

Hannibal cut in smoothly, he could probably sense that Will was in no mood to talk. "Abel Gideon found me at the observatory and forced me to take him here at gunpoint. He kept asking me to 'help him,' and became enraged when I apparently was unable to do so. Abigail was able to sneak away for a moment to call Will before he cornered the both of us in here. If Will hadn't made it in time, we would both certainly be dead."

There was something nagging at him, the recount seemed accurate enough, but Gideon had wanted something besides Hannibal's psychiatric services. Will had been inside his head, Gideon had completely forsaken the practice after Chilton scrambled him so thoroughly, but Hannibal had no reason to lie.

Gideon's words rang out behind his ears. *I wonder if you'd be so motivated to save him if you knew what he gets up to in his free time.* Did he know something Will didn't? Or was he just trying to fuck with him? Hannibal hadn't given any indication that he knew what Gideon was talking about.

"Will, you killed him then? How? This looks more messy than a gunshot."

"He threatened to shoot Hannibal unless I handed my gun over. There was a scalpel on the table, I didn't have much choice." He didn't like the amount of defensiveness that colored his tone, he shouldn't have to defend himself at all. Gideon was a deranged serial killer that had wanted to hurt what belonged to Will, it was *right* that he was dead.

"And why is Ms. Hobbs here? Shouldn't she be at Port Haven?"

"...I was released today." She was standing tall now, unabashed even in the presence of the corpse. Hannibal clearly didn't want to speak for her. "I live here too, got the papers signed and everything."

"What?" This was news to Will, in contrast his voice felt small and a little breathless. Hannibal had his guardianship approved?

He reached out for Will's wrist, encircling the still-bloody appendage in comforting warmth. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. It was actually the reason I endeavored to find you at lunch."

Will briefly grasped his hand before he separated them, of course he still wanted the contact, but there were too many people here and a corpse not five feet away. It would seem inappropriate. "We'll talk about this later, still got a bit of work to do."

“You don’t seem that beaten up, Will.” Jack’s inflection was less accusatory now, though his words conveyed the opposite.

“I’m not. Gideon was a murderer. He killed someone and held four more people hostage *tonight.* Sorry if I don’t feel particularly bad about this one.”

“It's good that he’s not haunting you, just don’t make it a habit. Don’t want more fuel for Lounds.” God, she was probably having a field day right now. She seemed pretty stricken when Will saw her in the observatory, but he could tell it was hammed up for the sake of appearing more considerate than she actually was. Just this one night would give her enough content for at least three well-trafficked articles. Probably four when she found out who killed Gideon, she’d have a field day ‘proving’ how dangerous he was.

“I don’t plan on attacking every suspect we have on sight, I’d prefer it if I didn’t have to kill anyone.” He hoped no one could tell that he was lying. “Do you think that you could call in forensics to wrap this up quick though? I’m sure everyone wants to sleep at some point tonight.”

The day had brought a constant stream of bodies and had them bustling around the city like chickens with their heads cut off. Every agent standing in Hannibal’s kitchen had pronounced eye bags, some were yawning even with the corpse still on the floor.

Jack gave the go ahead and forensics took over, taking pictures, statements, and evidence well into the night and early hours of the morning.

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Abigail was asleep on her feet by the time they were eventually allowed to leave. Hannibal’s home was still technically an active crime scene, so the three of them left for Wolftrap at around two in the morning, three when they arrived. The drive over was almost silent as Abigail slept curled up in the backseat and Will tried and failed not to fall asleep on the passenger side.

Will attempted to force himself to stay awake after the first nod of his head, but Hannibal just placed a soothing hand on his knee. “Sleep, darling. You deserve it.” His voice was a rich, low murmur as to not wake the resting girl.

“You shouldn’t have to-” A drawn-out yawn, long enough to make his eyes prickle, interrupted him. “You shouldn’t have to be the only one awake right now.”

“I don’t mind, and you need the rest. I’ll wake you when we get to your home.”

He wanted to argue, but his eyelids felt like they weighed twenty pounds each, so gradually he let them close. Hannibal should have probably retracted his hand from Will’s knee as he drove, but he was glad that it stayed, at least until he was fast asleep.

He awoke blearily to a gentle pressure on his forehead, then between his eyebrows, then once on both his cheekbones. His eyes opened to Hannibal's retreating lips. "We're here." He blinked a few times to clear the bleariness and forced some life into his heavy limbs.

A grumble came from the backseat, followed by a soft chuckle.

"Are you asleep, Abigail?" Hannibal playfully whispered.

"Mmhmm." She stubbornly kept her eyes closed and turned her head away from the porchlight.

Hannibal pulled open the back door which caused her to grumble even more as the cold air streamed in.

"You heard her, she's asleep and it would be unspeakably rude to leave her out here." Will huffed out a quick breath, a sleepy smile danced across his lips as he picked up the game he was playing.

"You're her guardian now, I'm sure you can be trusted to figure something out." She was already raising her arms, but of course, kept her eyes firmly shut.

Hannibal scooped her up quickly, like she weighed nothing. He hadn't had a hard time picking Will up either, it made him wonder about the man's exercise routine, he hadn't seen any gym equipment tucked into some corner of his home.

One of her hands fell limply from his shoulder as they passed the small mass of dogs, her fingers brushed their fur as they passed. After the dramatics of the day, it seemed unreal that this scene in front of him existed in the same reality. How could, not six hours after he killed a man, he watch his pseudo-daughter pretend to sleep so that his lover would carry her to her room in Will's home? Will didn't earn this image, it wasn't deserved, but guilt would taint this, a drop of dark oil into the pool of clear serenity of this moment. Will didn't let the ugly emotion manifest.

Hannibal returned downstairs after a moment, Will had already laid out a change of clothes for him.

Jack told him before he left to not come in tomorrow and Hannibal already left messages for the few patients he had on Fridays, so Will planned to not let either of them start their day until well past sunrise, which was only a few hours away at this point.

On any other night, the graceful sight of Hannibal slipping off his clothes, still stained with blood, would've lit a fire low in his gut. As it was, he still felt a shot of arousal, but he was too tired to do anything about it.

He rinsed the remaining flecks of Gideon's blood off his hands and face and slipped on a fresh pair of boxers, he didn't bother with a shirt. His bed was only full sized, but it still felt too empty without the second occupant who was currently pulling up the cotton sleep pants Will left out for him.

“Do you want something to eat before we turn in?”

“Are you serious? Just get over here.” He held up the covers for the other man who joined him without another moment of hesitation. Will wrapped himself around his warm body the second he was settled.

He wanted to fall asleep, pretend that it was any other night, but there was still tension hanging in the air with words unsaid.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He murmured into the other man’s chest, his hand rested right on the ink black skull.

“We don’t have to. It would be a shame if this rare instant was broken by the horrors of yesterday.”

“His blood is probably still under my nails, I can’t just pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Do you have to?” Hannibal gently shifted them so they were facing each other on the lumpy mattress. His hand caressed Will’s cheek, gently tucking his curls back again and again as they stubbornly sprang back into disarray. “Is there any emotion you feel the need to hide from? You were the hero of the day, Abigail and I are still alive because of your actions. Surely you don’t regret that.”

“Of course I don’t, but I killed a man. Again.”

“The fact that you took a life doesn’t bother you, you knew it was bound to happen if you continued in this line of work.”

Even after being proved again and again how steadfastly accepting Hannibal was, it was hard to force out his next words. “I enjoyed it, I can’t lie to you and say that I didn’t. I’m afraid I’m turning into Abel Gideon or Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

“Or the ripper?”

“Or the ripper.” He didn’t like the subtle shiver that shot down his spine at being compared to the ripper. It felt like winning a contest he shouldn’t have signed up for in the first place.

“You are nothing like those men, Will. You are entirely your own creation, despite their efforts to take root inside of you. Tonight, you were nothing but righteous, beautiful, painted victoriously with the blood of the unworthy. I don’t believe you in the wrong that you enjoyed the actions you had to take.”

“Others would. It's supposed to be the most ugly thing, to take a life.”

“Yet you don’t see it that way. I don’t either. I don’t think it's ugly that you saved my life, or Abigail’s, twice. If it was not your hand that killed those men, it would have been another that wouldn’t have appreciated it like you can.”

“I’m not a vigilante, I’m supposed to be a consultant.” Hannibal’s words did ring true in a way that sat heavy in his sternum. He could feel those men, understand them deeper than

other people. When he pulled the trigger, slit their throat, it wasn't the impersonal switch of the electric chair. Why couldn't he be the one to decide who was deserving?

That was a dangerous train of thought to follow though. How true would it be the next time he insisted that he didn't want to kill anybody?

"A consultant with a firearm provided by the state. You're hardly the first agent with a body count." His tone was light, slightly teasing. It made Will feel a little better, Hannibal clearly wasn't upset by what happened tonight at all, which calmed his nerves immensely.

He fell silent for a few moments, out of words and the strength for words now that he knew that Hannibal still wasn't disgusted by him after he admitted he took pleasure in taking a life.

"Are you alright, Will?" he whispered as he gently ran his thumb across his cheek.

"I am now." He breached the small gap of space between them and placed lazy kisses on Hannibal's lips. One of his cold feet wedged itself between the other man's shins and Hannibal drew them close so they lay chest-to-chest.

Perhaps everyone else would deem him a psychopath, predestined to commit heinous acts of unrestrained violence.

Perhaps everyone else didn't matter, because what could anyone else offer him that was sweeter than this?

Chapter End Notes

am i finally at the point where i have to tag dark!will or should i have done that like 10 chapters ago

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail sat at the high kitchen counter while Will chopped vegetables, tapping intermittently at Hannibal's tablet.

"You can tell how psyched she was to write this. She's not even trying to be subtle anymore." She turned the tablet to face him, the headline read in big bold letters *'Killer Fed Kills Killers: When will it not be Enough?'* accompanied by a photo of him in the corner of Hannibal's dining room, hand still coated in blood. Lounds must've gotten a photo through the patio door.

"I don't think she was ever subtle. Now she's just seeing how far she can push before someone threatens a lawsuit."

Hannibal returned from his pantry bearing a thick cut of meat sealed in brown paper wrappings and a bottle of red wine.

"Would you like me to call my lawyers, Will? You certainly have the grounds to file a libel claim now."

"No, it'll just encourage her. She'll weasel under the law and write something with even more vitriol."

"I suppose that's true, she does have a talent for dodging her dues."

"What did you even do to get her this mad?" Abigail laughed as she flipped through the article.

"I may have threatened her a while back, but it can't be the first time, not with the way she writes."

"Christ, what did you say?" There was barely disguised delight in her tone, it was infectious.

"'It's not smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living.' Got in a lot of heat for that one."

Abigail laughed again and Will failed to control his own pleased expression.

"Undeserved in my opinion." Hannibal smoothly retrieved the diced vegetables from Will's cutting board. "She should not have continued to poke the viper if she did not expect to get bit. Authorities should have attempted to take her stick, not your fangs."

"I thought you saw me as a mongoose?"

"Semantics, darling." His lips grazed Will's temple while Abigail rolled her eyes.

Her light visage gradually fell back into one more subdued and reserved as he and Hannibal finished preparing their supper. There was something weighing on her mind. He wished he could ask, wished he knew how to.

He did the only thing he knew how to do; he gathered the evidence, and felt.

Her fingers were twitching, not shaky, restless. Her lip quirked into a wry, dissatisfied grimace. He felt anticipation in his gut and a slight resentment when there was no defined promise to when it would end.

Her eyes flicked to her own hand, she clenched her fist like she was firmly clutching something long and narrow. Will's eyes darted away before she could catch him staring.

What was she waiting for? There was discomfort present in her mannerisms, not overpowering, but enough to warrant concern.

He couldn't tell if the discomfort's origin was from him and presumably his relationship with her guardian, or some other outside factor. Whatever it was, it tied into her anticipation, he just wasn't sure how.

Hannibal insisted on plating all their dishes, but he allowed Will to help carry them to the dining room. He crossed the spot where he spilled Gideon's blood less than 72 hours ago.

He came around and filled their glasses with the red wine he insisted would pair perfectly with the duck confit. Abigail raised her own glass and he filled it obligingly, she *was* an adult after all.

Maybe he didn't know how to ask what was going on with her, but safer conversation wasn't difficult.

"How is it?" He gestured towards her plate, Hannibal let him help with this meal more than he typically did, hopefully it was still edible.

She smirked at him then caught Hannibal's eye. For a second, he was the one who felt like an outsider in the room.

"Delicious. A lazy bird, wasn't he?"

"A little too sedentary, he ended up on your plate after all." A look passed between them that Will couldn't decipher. Abigail must've been picking up Hannibal's habits if he was having this hard of a time reading her.

The meal *was* delicious though, Will wouldn't argue that.

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She felt…well she didn't exactly know how she felt. Certainly better now that she wasn't stuck at the recovery center, she could finally breathe outside that constant stream of pity and condescension. But she still felt…stuck, waiting. Hannibal promised violence and she found herself eagerly anticipating it rather than dreading it.

So far though, nothing had happened. He gave her space when she wanted it, same with his company. She had unrestrained access to his books, instruments, and kitchen, within his specifications of course. They were even planning on getting her her own car that weekend.

The most he had asked from her was a small amount of play-acting. She hadn't realized it at the time, but the whole evening that culminated in Will killing Abel Gideon had been carefully orchestrated.

He'd been testing her, she knew that now. He might've been testing Will at the same time. Apparently, he'd gotten the result he wanted in both their cases, he was all reserved smiles and paternal gentleness the rest of the night.

It might've been an act of childish fragility on her part, but she couldn't deny how nice it was to be carried to bed. Her own father hadn't done that for her since she was a little girl.

Hannibal didn't pity her, she knew that every scrap of his affection was earned. It wasn't the healthiest practice, but honestly she preferred it to the condescending care she'd get anywhere else. In exchange for acknowledging her desire to not entirely shed her upbringing and protect her monster, she had to acknowledge and protect his. It was equivalent even if she was his dependent at the moment.

Currently, he was gently plucking away at his harpsichord, composing if the sudden starts and stops were any indication. He wouldn't mind if she interrupted him if she waited for him to finish the stanza.

She grabbed a random book from his shelves, she didn't even look at the title as she settled on the leather armchair in front of the fireplace.

It was another twenty minutes before she heard him play the finished thought. The piece wasn't done, but the phrase was finished.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes, Abigail?"

She gulped, she hadn't actually prepared what she was going to say, but he was waiting for her to speak.

"When…" She trailed off. What was she supposed to say? *When are you going to ask me to kill someone?* It seemed crazy to even think, but that's what he wanted, right? That's what he wanted from Will a week and a half ago. "...when do you want to go look at cars?" *Coward.*

"I was thinking Sunday afternoon, if you're amicable. Will should be free then, he'll be more knowledgeable on this topic than I." His footsteps were silent as he joined her at the fire. "But that's not what you wanted to ask me about, was it?"

The fire reflected in his dark eyes, she was confident he knew exactly what she wanted.

Her voice was soft and small when it came out, not out of fear or delicacy though, but for the anxiety that came with bringing a taboo to light. "When will I have to…" It seemed wrong to

expose these thoughts to spoken language where they could be torn apart and digested.

“Have to? Or get to?” There was a spark of amusement in his gaze, he could tell if she lied no matter which answer she chose.

“Get to,” She whispered down towards her book. Despite her tone, it was the truth, she didn’t want to admit it, but she was jealous that Will was the one Hannbibal allowed to take a life. He promised her power, a way to distance herself from weakness and she realized that in truth, she wanted it desperately. “I want to, you said you’d show me how.”

“When would you like to learn, Abigail? When do you want to take back the power that was stolen from you?”

“Now,” The book fell from her hands as she met his gaze with a heavy sincerity. “I don’t want to keep waiting and waiting and thinking ‘Is it now? Is it today? Would I be able to do it if he asked me to at this moment?’”

“Could you? Right now, if I asked that of you?”

She could almost feel the flesh being forcibly separated from bone under her knife. She’d never been there when her father took her doppelgänger's lives, she wondered what the other side felt like, what it *sounded* like. “Yes.” She filled the single word with as much conviction as she could.

He smiled, for once it went all the way up to his eyes. “‘Atta girl.”

In one smooth motion, he was up from his chair, standing in front of her, offering his hand to help her up. “Follow me.”

She did in mute silence. Was this it? Would they leave and find someone right now?

He didn’t lead her out of his home, but rather to his locked spare pantry room. She’d never been inside, but it seemed fairly normal. There was another fridge and freezer in here along with a few barrels of some sort of fermenting alcohol.

He crouched down suddenly, finding a latch that perfectly blended in with the hardwood flooring. Stairs leading down opened up in the floor- a secret room. Her steps faltered for just a moment.

“I’m giving you a rare gift, Abigail. Prove to me that you deserve it.”

She nodded, still at a loss for words, but her nerves were steeled.

He gestured for her to go first, she stepped down without hesitation. The lights flickered on above her, stark white, they illuminated the whole space, filling every nook and cranny with harsh bright light.

The whole basement was sterile white walls and cement flooring. There were large saws, racks of tools and medical instruments, examination tables, hooks embedded into the ceiling, and multiple drains in the floor.

She almost missed all of it though as her eyes were drawn to the center of the room where a woman was gagged and bound to a heavy metal chair.

Abigail recognized her, she was one of the resident psychiatrists at Port Haven, and she was currently blinking up at the ceiling, making little pathetic noises behind the gag.

She heard the tell-tale sound of a solid lock sliding into place, Hannibal appeared at her side just a moment later.

“You felt powerless during your time institutionalized, here is your chance to take that power back. Show me your design, Abigail.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, she could feel it beat in her ears. He didn't press a knife into her hand, instead he let her choose from the broad selection he had laid out on a nearby table. There was a range of tools that spanned before her, from scalpels and kitchen knives to more blunt objects, like bats and meat tenderizers.

What drew her eye though, was a jagged hunting knife, its edge was curved and serrated, and the tip was wickedly sharp, almost identical to the knife she gutted Nicolas Boyle with.

It sat slightly askew from the other tools, Hannibal probably knew she would pick this one.

She looked back at him just once as she weighed the knife in her palm. He stood still and poised as a statue, his hands folded neatly in front him as he watched her with mild curiosity.

She saw the moment Dr. Callaghan recognized her. Her thrashing stopped for just a second as her eyes widened, a single fleck of hope glinted in her irises until they dropped to the wicked knife held steadily in Abigail’s hand. The thrashing resumed tenfold, the gagged screams would almost be loud enough to reach the cellar door.

It probably wouldn't matter if she was screaming at full volume, Abigail would bet all her fingers and toes that this room was completely soundproofed.

She parted the bound psychiatrist’s shirt to reveal her smooth stomach, unblemished except for the scar of a c-section. It jumped beneath her fingers, she could literally *feel* this woman’s fear. It was directed at *her,* this prey knew for once that Abigail was the predator, the one to be terrified of.

She plunged the knife into her gut and didn’t slide her gaze from the doctor’s wide eyes. The last time she’d done this, she hadn’t let herself savor it, too many unpredictabilities had sent her mind into disarray.

Not now, she took the time to appreciate every sound behind strained lips and the twitch of organs underneath her knife. Blood spilled warm over her hand, she thrust her hand that wasn’t clutching the knife inside the gash to feel the hot, slick insides with her own fingertips. Humans were so similar to animals, the only difference was the lack of soft fur to protect those vulnerable parts.

She wrenched the knife out and immediately forced it across the woman's neck. She'd been curious about how it felt since she watched Will perform the same action.

Dr. Callaghan sputtered and gasped until she eventually stopped moving, it took longer than Abigail expected, humans clung to life in a way animals didn't. A certain fevered desperation came with consciousness, she supposed.

She jerked the knife out and it dropped to the cement floor with a dull thud that was muffled in her ears. Her breath felt strong and steady as she pulled apart the deep laceration, she danced her fingers along the windpipe, veins, and arteries from the inside.

If her father had sunk the knife a bit deeper, he would've killed her by severing those very veins. The delicate skin of the dead woman's neck made her own feel like iron in comparison.

Abigail didn't know how long it was until she withdrew her hands. They were evenly coated in red all the way up to her mid forearm, like she was wearing a pair of thin, shiny gloves.

When she finally turned to face Hannibal, her mentor, he wore the same expression of pride as when Abigail triumphantly held the fish she caught aloft. It didn't appear menacing in the slightest, simply paternal, without desire to harm her in turn.

In this room designed for murder, hands coated in gore, staring at the most prolific serial killer in recent history, she, for once, felt utterly safe and utterly sane, more at-ease than she had maybe her entire life.

He smiled, affection leaked through the edges of his blank mask.

"Welcome home, Abigail."

———

It was past midnight when Will finally left Quantico. Normally, he'd either spend the night at Hannibal's after running home to take care of the dogs or Hannibal would spend the night at his, more often than not with Abigail in tow. This would be the first night in over a week that he wouldn't be sharing his bed.

To anyone else, that might've been something to look forward to, all that space to sprawl and no need to share the covers, but Will knew he would simply be lonely. He'd spent so many years sleeping in the fetal position in a bed that always felt too big. The only time he awoke feeling well-rested was when he fell asleep in Hannibal's arms, the pressure and warmth that a weighted blanket couldn't imitate.

He'd basically resigned himself to not sleeping tonight. If he didn't have his pack to let out, he would have just stayed in his office.

The dogs didn't seem to mind a 1:00 am walk, they didn't sleep in strict circadian rhythms like humans trained themselves to.

He shuffled back into the woods as the dogs bounded ahead or followed at a lazy pace. Their snuffles and crunching footsteps faded into the natural sounds of the forest. They may be domesticated, but at their core they were still four-legged beasts, and they found their spot in the natural order among the squirrels and tree roots.

There was some serenity in that, they had a simplistic way of absorbing the world around them, they took it in stride where he saw every nauseating detail. He used to wish that one day he would wake up color blind, with a brain dulled down to mere instinct, though the fantasy had faded over the last several weeks.

He didn't pretend to not know the reason why.

As he walked away from his little home, he turned around to see it emerge from the thicket of trees. It stood there like a beacon in the tall grass and patches of melting snow, but the comfort he saw in the image once waned to a dull ache.

There was no shadow of another figure darkening his window, all it served to do was make him want to pick up his phone and call his partner. But he was an adult, and honestly they hadn’t been together that long, he could weather one night alone.

Idly he scratched at the mark on his chest as Maya did her damnedest to trip him on their trek back to his little home.

He tried to lay down for a while, he stripped down to his boxers and attempted to sink into his mattress, but as he thought, sleep wouldn’t touch him tonight. At two in the morning he got up once again to relieve himself, and he knew he’d be watching the sun come up in a few hours.

The mirror emphasized his eye bags, but overall his skin looked healthier, less gaunt. His eyes wandered down to his soulmark, he recalled how rigorously he used to check it, back when he thought its matching half was on the skin of a killer.

He supposed it was. Hannibal himself had said that they were both killers, they had both taken a life, two in Will’s case, so he wasn’t wrong. Even now he still couldn’t feel any guilt over what he did to Gideon, and there wasn’t much in the way of guilt over lack of guilt. He let himself feel power, ease, and satisfaction, and let everything else pass by him in the stream, just like Hannibal suggested.

It was a much better way of living, Hannibal had been right there.

With his index finger he gently traced the lines on his chest, pretending that he wasn’t pretending the digit belonged to someone else.

The events of that night played in his head on repeat. He didn’t imagine other outcomes, the whole situation seemed like it only could have gone the way it did. Gideon was a dead man walking on borrowed time from the moment he set his sights on Hannibal, it was something Will just knew, though he couldn’t place why.

Gideon’s words tossed and turned in his skull as he continued his ministrations.

I wonder if you'd be so motivated to save him if you knew what he gets up to in his free time.

He followed a tine that caressed one of his central ribs, it didn't stick out like it used to. There was a thin layer of fat covering his bones now, a drastic improvement.

I wonder who this monster is to you

Another tine curled along his shoulder, gracing the knobby bone where it connected with his upper arm. It cut right through the scar where he was stabbed back when he was a police officer.

I didn't think men like us got soulmates.

The thick roots that attached to the skull sat on either side of the small dip in between his pectoral muscles, the flesh there was soft and unmarred by any abrasions.

Maybe I'll get my mind back if I kill the real thing.

Goosebumps trailed up his neck as he brushed the tine that traced his jugular, it actually followed the vein further down than he originally noticed. He pressed on it at a point near his collarbone and could feel his blood pumping below his finger.

You have no idea who you're protecting.

Gideon was a raving lunatic, he was spouting nonsense in an attempt to fix his broken mind. There were no associations to make, no puzzle pieces to put together, Will's brain was simply torturing him with connections, like it always had.

He pulled back from the mirror to fully take in the large, dark stain. Hannibal had called it beautiful, and it was, even when Will truly feared it, he couldn't deny that deep down he also believed it was beautiful. But it still reminded him of an omen- so large and without a hint of color, it called to mind an intangible feeling of foreboding.

It was because of him, at his core he knew that. Will had all these uncontrollable thoughts and only slightly more controlled urges, he was the possessive ink blot on the blank slate of Hannibal Lecter. He seemed more than happy to bear the mark though, so Will wouldn't blame himself too heavily.

His mind still stubbornly begged for connection that he refused to make, this wasn't a case. Gideon was looking for an out and Hannibal, with his similar background and poised air, was an easy target, there was nothing more to this story.

Will spent the rest of the night in his boxers tying flies at his well-stocked workbench. The weather was starting to clear up, he'd need his supplies for his next fishing trip.

Chapter End Notes

abigail is such a strange character to write, for how important she is to the overall story she doesnt get much screen time, so shes not very flushed out. anyways i love her <333

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The spring thaw revealed more than just the brown grass and hibernating mammals. Jack brought him to a scene that was almost pleasant to walk to, it was deep in the winding woods and near a stream that wasn't too different from the one that bordered Will's home. The major difference was the potent stench of death, bloated and rotting over.

It wasn't an uncommon sight to see the remains of fish decaying in stagnant water. Any fisherman with a lick of experience had seen the foul-smelling sight a handful of times. These corpses reminded him of those fish, too full of death and disease for the normal predators to want a bite.

The metaphor kind of fell apart when they examined who the bodies used to belong to before they were entombed in the stream. There was nothing physically wrong with the victims themselves, except of course the lethal amount of heroin in their systems and hard resin they were coated in. Background checks didn't reveal any obvious secrets either.

Whoever their killer was, he put a lot of time into making sure the bodies were preserved a certain way. It seemed strange that he would just throw them away.

"What do you got, Will?" Jack stood nearby, eyeing the corpses with disgust he didn't bother trying to hide.

"I think these are his discards. There was something wrong with them, they didn't fit into his design, so he tore out their fittings and sent them down the river."

"So there's more bodies?"

"A lot more, I'd say. Look for disappearances in the area, might turn up something more once we have the scope of who he's taking."

It was strange how even a job as horrifying as his could become routine after a point. He was left lingering at the sidelines as people more qualified for the specific work started bagging and tagging the corpses. There weren't many civilians gathered with how far out they were, only a couple of the local landowners who'd found the bodies in the first place.

Though, as usual there was one annoying gnat that still persistently clung to the barrier of the police tape. The local cop that was supposed to hold the line didn't seem to care much that the reporter was very obviously on the wrong side.

"Mr. Graham, a few questions?" He didn't know why Lounds was even pretending to play nice at this point.

"I read your last article Freddie, I have nothing to say to you."

“I’m not above recounting my statements if you give me a better story. You’ve got quite the buzz lately, two serial killers dispatched with your own hands and a near-perfect catch rate. Don’t you want to clear your name while the attention is still on you?”

“I wouldn’t have to clear my name if you didn’t rake it through the coals in the first place. I don’t know what story you’re chasing here, but you’re not getting it from me.” He didn’t stomp off in a specific direction, he just had to be away from Lounds.

Of course it wasn’t that easy though. “I’ve got a lot of readers, Graham, and they’re not just interested in you. You and the other killers you’re playing house with paint quite the interesting picture.”

She’s trying to goad you, don’t turn around. He tried to keep his back still as stone, but Will was never a man composed of rock. He was liquid that was pushed and pulled with the tide of more forceful gravities, Lounds knew how to dig a well he would seep into.

“They’re not killers.”

“So you admit that you are?”

“It was self defense. I was aquitted.”

“I’m sure you were, Agent Crawford wouldn’t want his favorite bloodhound kenneled after all.” Will wondered if he’d be able to get around a third manslaughter charge. Lounds was certainly tempting him to find out. Jack probably wouldn’t even be that upset.

“Your readers are going to get bored if you just keep regurgitating the same story over and over again. How many times are you going to threaten my family? We’ve been here before, I figured you thrived on new material, not panning through a stream that had long since lost its precious metals.”

“I’ll keep digging until I get the truth. You’re hiding something, your whole little make believe household is hiding something, and I intend to see it with my own eyes.”

“You’re not chasing some moral truth, you’re enacting a vendetta. I didn’t grant your interviews, Hannibal stopped you from recording my session, and Abigail backed out of that book deal. This is your way of taking your petty vengeance, it's pathetic.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond, he didn’t technically have authority here, but the local cop came when he asked to have her escorted behind the tape.

———

Usually Hannibal met him at his front door when Will showed up after work. He didn't have to, he gave Will a key weeks ago, but he seemed to like the routine of sweeping the door open and taking his coat, it gave him an excuse to run his hands along Will’s shoulders.

He didn't need an excuse, Will had told him before, but he insisted. Not that Will was complaining- Hannibal enjoyed his old-fashioned romance and Will was just happy to have the man’s hands on him.

Apparently there'd be no subtle groping at the door today as Hannibal wasn't on the other side. His car was in the driveway though Abigail's was missing, so there was one possibility.

He figured he'd rule out everything else before he called; he started his search in the kitchen which, surprisingly, yielded no results. The study was also empty, same with the lounge, honestly how many rooms did one man need?

His quest came to an end when he opened the door to his office. Hannibal was drawing at his desk, though from where Will was standing, there seemed to be too many right angles for him to be sketching something organic. There were a few discarded papers near the one he was currently working on that Will couldn't in good faith say were scattered about- he was far too orderly for the word.

“My apologies Will, I'm afraid I got a bit distracted by my current project.” He was already out of his seat and crossing the room.

“It's not a problem, I've got a key for a reason. Though I was a bit worried when I saw Abigail's car missing. Where is she anyway?”

“She took one of my cards and said she'd be back late. I won't pretend I know where she's run off to, but if I had to guess she's likely off supplementing her wardrobe, she mentioned wanting to earlier this week. She was adamant that I was not to join her, apparently my tastes are a tad too outdated.”

“She took your card and ran off with the car you bought her to go buy clothes you wouldn’t approve of. I guess she really is a teenager.” Will only realized that he’d failed to shed his jacket at the front door when Hannibal’s hands gently eased him out of it. Just like he’d come to expect, they lingered, caressing his shoulders and the planes of his back as they drew the garment away.

“Her audacity is well deserved, it's probably a novel experience for her to stage a rebellion without fear of drastic consequences.”

“You’re not going to do anything?”

“No, and I don’t believe you want me to. Besides, she’s earned more than a little independence, though she promised she would text me every few hours, just in case. Are you worried?”

“Not particularly, she’s not as fragile as everyone else wants to believe. I certainly would’ve wanted a bit of freedom at that age, especially if I’d been cooped up as long as she had.”

“I have to agree, I fear my body count would be far higher if I’d been forced to endure her trials. I was quite a temperamental youth.”

“Honestly, I can’t imagine it. You seem like you burst from the womb in a waistcoat, it's hard to picture you anything but perfectly put together.”

“You’ve seen me without my composure, bare as the day I was born. Surely it's not that hard to imagine.” His voice dropped in pitch as he spoke, it sent a shiver up Will’s spine and heat down his gut. The gentle circles Hannibal’s thumb was making on his hip suddenly felt a lot less chaste than they had a moment ago.

“It’s not, but sometimes you feel like two separate creations. There’s the illustrious Dr. Lecter, covered in plaid and paisley, who presents himself as the harmless eccentric who seems like he’d be far more at home in renaissance Italy. And then there’s the man you hide behind a very well constructed mask, the man that lost himself braiding our daughter’s hair who also bites me until I bleed. It can be hard to conflate the two at times.” Will leaned into him, the press of his body was warm and welcome, despite all the layers that still separated.

“Which creation do you feel I am now? Which creation do you lay claim over?” Will turned to face him, one hand curled around his hip, the other on the back of his neck in a possessive grasp.

“Both, all. There’s no part of you that isn’t mine, but the latter can’t hide my claim behind suits and metaphors. Currently, that primal part of you is hibernating, or perhaps simply lurking behind a very thick shroud. He only comes out when you allow your control to falter, which you don’t often.”

“It was never my intention to hide your influence. If you wished it, I would etch your initials onto my brow, or perhaps I’d give you the knife so you could carve your entire name.” Will’s hand tightened around his neck. He recalled the night he watched Hannibal save a man’s life in the back of an ambulance, the night he envisioned strapping Hannibal down and slicing his- no *their*- soulmark into his chest.

He didn’t move his own head as he drug Hannibal down the near-negligible inches that separated them. Immediately he parted around Will’s forceful invasion, his hands caressing Will’s jaw like he was something precious, like he wasn’t currently leaving nail marks on his neck and hip.

After a few seconds he pulled back, Hannibal chased the contact as he began to draw away, keeping Will’s face cradled between his steady hands. He was only able to pull them away after he pressed his lips to both the doctor's palms.

“What were you working on when I walked in?”

Hannibal seemed almost dazed for half a second before his lidded eyes snapped back to focus. He smoothed one hand down his suit, fixing a nonexistent wrinkle, Will didn’t think he’d ever seen him fidget before now. It only took a moment for his full composure to return to him though, Will wondered how long he’d be able to keep it gone.

“I actually wanted your opinion on that,” Now that Will got a closer look, he could see that these weren’t really drawings, they were blueprints. His elegant script showed numbers and brief descriptions of fittings, wood type, and flooring. He looked to be drafting some type of shed? But the numbers didn’t make the most sense, no matter if he was using the metric or imperial system.

“Are you building something? These look a bit like your architectural sketches, but they’re for something you’re planning, right?”

“Yes, I’d like to hire contractors to fashion a few kennels. I wanted to have a rough idea of the dimensions and style I was looking for before I made any calls.”

“Kennels? I didn’t think you wanted pets.”

“Not my own, but I’ve become quite fond of your pack. My home should accommodate both our needs, naturally.” Will hadn’t even considered bringing the dogs to Hannibal’s pristine home.

“You’re going to hire contractors…for kennels?” The designs in front of him were detailed, but not overly complicated. A laugh passed unbidden from his chest, he hadn’t known that his life allowed him to laugh as much as he had recently.

Hannibal just quirked an eyebrow, obviously he hadn’t considered another option.

“It's a waste of money. Just get the supplies, I’ll build them.” It shouldn’t be as endearing as it was for Hannibal to throw his money at something comparatively frivolous. Will guessed it spoke towards infatuation that it only amused him rather than upset his paycheck-to-paycheck upbringing. His father would be rolling in his grave.

Hannibal gave him another one of those thin-lipped smiles that Will had learned were the equivalent of a face-splitting grin on anyone else. “We’ll make them together, if you’ll forgive my rudimentary skills in woodworking.”

It was early enough in the evening that they still had some daylight to spare- there was no time like the present.

Of course they couldn’t just go to a normal hardware store, Hannibal found a local lumberyard that carried the specific logs he was looking for. When they were sanded and stained, they’d perfectly match the exterior of his home.

For one who claimed he was an ametuer, his blueprints were both accurate and stunningly specific.

They were in and back on the road within the hour, lumber filled in a hitch that looked out of place attached to the spotless Bentley.

“I’ve only now realized that I failed to ask about the scene Uncle Jack brought you to today, unless of course you don’t wish to discuss work.”

“I don’t think we have any barriers left, not that I was good at keeping them anyway. The bodies were covered in a hard resin shell and injected with a chemical compound that preserves color.”

“A lot of time and effort went into these corpses that were just tossed away.”

“They were his discards. They didn’t fit his design so he ripped out their stitches and sent them down the river.”

“What image was he trying to create? What drew him to these people?”

“He’s chasing aesthetics, all he wants is the color of their skin. Not much that’ll trace back to the killer though.”

“Was the skin slightly bunched or wrinkled? There is a term used when describing oil paintings called the craquelure which describes the cracks in the paint. It’s possible something might be found in the small recesses.”

“I’ll let the team know. Currently they’re looking for disappearances in the area, get a scope of what we’re looking at.”

“I’m eager to know what you find.” He looked over as he drove, he could probably sense Will’s anticipation. “That wasn’t all that happened though, was it?”

“Lounds was there. She’s not going to stop, not now that she has a grudge against all of us.”

“I can’t help but feel it won’t be long until she pays her dues. If an action remains unpunished, eventually the affected will retaliate, if they are able.”

“I’m surprised no one has tried yet. If she’s written a single complimentary article, I haven’t seen it.”

“Compliments don’t produce hits, she wouldn’t get a paycheck with puff pieces and wedding announcements. But with reward comes risk, surely she’s accepted the risk of her station and if not, I suspect she will learn of it soon.”

“Here’s to hoping.” Hannibal never cared about his morbid way of thinking, Will understood now that his thoughts were tinted in that same dark palette.

He couldn’t help but wonder why. For all their open conversations, there were still parts of him that were shrouded from Will’s view. If he could, he would peel back Hannibal’s skin, then the muscle, and crack into his bones until he could see every little hidden bit of the man before him.

They both unloaded the hitch side-by-side carrying armfuls of wooden planks to the large space of Hannibal’s backyard. The task was exceedingly normal, domestic even, a stark contrast to his thoughts from just a few minutes ago.

Maybe that was alright too.

He already told Hannibal that he wanted all of him, even the parts he chose to hide behind that impenetrable mask. There was a dichotomy in his desire. He wanted to possess every aspect, both the thoughtful eccentric that would taint his perfectly controlled home with Will’s animals and the man that made him bleed every time they came together. He seemed to want the same, he was just as stalwart in his acceptance when Will came to him in the middle of a hallucination-filled breakdown as when he killed a man in front of him. Twice.

Maybe that's what it meant to be soulmates. Will couldn't believe that for years he'd resented the whole concept.

The sun finally dipped below the horizon by the time the hitch was unloaded. They both retreated inside for the time being, there'd be time later to assemble the kennels.

———

Hannibal was no stranger to making sacrifices, not of course in the literal sense- he never claimed to be holy, his kills weren't offerings to a divine being- but in order to have lived freely as long as he had, drastic measures needed to be taken every now and again. On multiple occasions, tiny slip-ups have led to him having to completely abandon homes, people, and jobs to continue living how he wanted, but eventually the sacrifice would be made and he would continue on as he always had with even more contingencies in place.

Currently another sacrifice was taking place, though unfortunately, not one he'd be allowed to witness. He'd make Abigail regail him with every minute detail at a later time, but it was necessary that she undertake this alone, she'd come away much stronger and much more resilient for it.

One concession that was relatively easy to make in comparison, though never expected, was allowing live animals into his home. From a purely theoretical standpoint, he enjoyed them, they had a certain connection with their natural instincts that humans didn't, but in practice, they were messy beings, prone to throwing chaos into his perfectly controlled space.

Hannibal didn't like giving up control. He'd made it this far because of his control over himself and other people's perception of him. He learned perfect self-control before he was even a teenager, and as he grew he learned that it didn't have to end with him, well placed words and actions could control other people as well.

Recently, his life had been less in control than he expected. The dogs were only one rung on a ladder that was becoming disturbingly tall.

It all came back to Will. Currently, none of the concessions he'd made would seem all that significant considering what he was, but Hannibal had always been intimately aware of himself and his desires. Now, those desires were heading in directions he'd not prepared for, and that worried him.

Will wasn't ready to see him, not yet, but God above did he want to show him. For the very first time in his life, he wanted to be *seen.* He hadn't even known he was missing something so important until it became a possibility.

The kennels might be the current culmination, but they weren't even the first physical aspect of Will's influence over his life. He'd not only allowed, but encouraged the profiler to bleed him, mark him like a possession, and it was *thrilling.*

He shouldn't be surprised he felt this way. It was the natural progression of all his actions up to that point- the dinners, nights spent in each other's company, his constant presence at Will's bedside when he was hospitalized. One of the very first actions Hannibal took after he

met the man was to kill for him, he hadn't killed for anyone but himself since he was a child. He questioned why he allowed one person to do this to him, to be allowed to affect him like this.

Will reached for him in between drying plates. Hannibal's hands were still trapped in the suds in his sink, but Will stole a moment to slip his hand across the small of his back and press his lips to the hinge of his jawbone, his teeth grazed as he pulled away- back to the drying rack as if nothing happened.

Hannibal's hands hadn't moved the entire time. This was exactly what he was talking about, Will affected him. Even if it wasn't obvious, it was still extant.

The problem though, was that he didn't want him to stop.

He forced his hands to move again, hopefully Will hadn't noticed the pause. One glance at his self-satisfied smirk told him that he did.

It wasn't just in little moments like these, Will wanted past his veil every chance he could. When they met, Will dreaded eye contact, but now, at least with Hannibal, he used it like a weapon- a crowbar to force open the steel door he kept shut.

He looked at him like he didn't care that in the process of revealing his secrets, he would leave Hannibal flayed. People had attempted to breach his walls before, but no one *craved* it like Will did, it stroked his ego like nothing else.

Maybe he could afford to concede, just this once. Will would make a fine captor if he let his heart out of its iron cage.

With the dishes clean and set to dry, there was no more pretense for their closeness, not that they required much pretense in the first place. Will boxed him in before he could turn around, plastering his front along Hannibal's back. He could feel him through the fabric of both their slacks.

"Dinner was delicious, but I noticed we skipped dessert?" He nipped at Hannibal's ear as he spoke low and close to him. He'd never met someone who bit as often as Will did, as often as he himself did, he couldn't deny the pleasure that shot through him at every exposure to the man's teeth.

"The meal is not over yet, darling." He spun around in Will's grasp, though he didn't move back to accommodate, they stayed pressed so close they could've been one being.

"Good, because I'm *starving.* " From anyone else, the words would seem cliched, but the expression that Will wore was ravenous, and who was he to deny needed nourishment?

Will's lips quirked up in that teasing little grin he wore more and more frequently. It held satisfaction, confidence, and power, and it was devastatingly attractive on him. A Will Graham drenched in fear was beautiful, his suffering was utterly unique and glorious to behold, but this sinful confidence was something else entirely. He was enchanting, he made Hannibal want to worship him as his god.

Soon he'd allow the creature free, unshackled from the chains of guilt that Will kept so tightly around it. Right now though, he'd very much like to take his lovely creature to bed.

He drew Will's lips to his own and trailed a hand down his front, palming him softly through the layers of fabric. The whines and grunts he received, panted directly into his mouth, urged him on, he allowed more pressure where Will clearly wanted it.

His partner pulled away in frustration. "Bedroom. Now." His eyes were all fire, threatening to consume him, but Hannibal had a weakness for consumption so he led the way before Will could.

Will grabbed him by the hips before the door fully clicked shut and hauled him near the bed with a heady fervor. Hannibal had taken his fair share of lovers in the past, ranging from casual flings to people hoping to make a permanent mark somewhere in his life, not a single person made him lose his head the way Will did. It should have been terrifying, but instead it was absolutely electrifying, Will drew out his beast like a hunter flushing grouse from the scrubs.

The backs of his knees hit the bed as Will backed him across the room. His presence was much larger than his lithe body at the moment, he pushed Hannibal down so his back hit the mattress as Will pounced, holding him in place.

That was another difference between his current and all his past lovers, he never would have allowed any of them to dominate him like this. He never would have allowed that loss of control with anyone else, but of course that particular shield fell in the wake of the one man who could utterly destroy him.

It was dangerous, but utterly perfect. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this *alive.*

Searching hands pawed at his shirt, seeking the skin-to-skin contact he knew Will had denied himself for so long. He was more than happy to indulge that craving. Shirts, socks, and pants were carelessly discarded. His person suit cringed at the wrinkles that were sure to form, but the man-shaped beast his soul manifested as couldn't give less of a shit.

Will was on top of him, never still for a second as he explored every newly revealed patch of skin. He pressed open mouth kisses down his neck, across his mark- his tongue traced the paths of the tines. He continued down further, leaving a trail of nips and sucks as Will mouthed at his navel.

He couldn't- didn't want to- help the heavy breaths that fled his lips. Will's hands dug into his hips, leaving sure bruises in the shape of his fingers, and rutted against his thigh. On anyone else, the motions would be churlish and desperate, but coming from Will, they made his blood run boiling hot.

"Will, Will *please,* " He grasped at the other man's shoulders, attempting to pull him back up his chest. His tongue felt heavy, coated in anticipatory saliva- his body's unconscious reactions to a meal presented.

He followed the insistence of Hannibal's hands with a moment of reluctance, though he scrambled back up to slot their mouths together quickly.

"On your back, darling," He whispered against Will's lips. *"Let me taste you."*

They rolled together, bunching up the silk sheets as they twisted. Will let out a sweet groan as Hannibal's weight settled on top of him. His hands locked around Hannibal's head to keep it in place as he tore at his mouth.

The skin of a person's lip was so thin, so easy to break. "More teeth, dear." The rumble that Will responded with was animalistic, hungry. He worried and tore at the skin of Hannibal's lower lip, peeling small bits of the skin away, layer by layer.

To Hannibal's delight, Will swallowed every tiny bit of skin that was peeled off. He felt the movement of the other man's throat under his hand, it sent a burning shot all the way through his gut.

Another savage bite and his blood spilled freely from his lip, Will kissed him hard, further opening the wound and coating his tongue with the coppery spill.

He trailed further and further down Will's neck, then his torso, following the path Will had taken. His hands kneaded the flesh beneath his palms, Will writhed beneath them, full to the brim with burning life. He could feel Will's leaking cock drag against his body as he mouthed along his sternum, his navel, his pelvis, leaving a red creek in his wake.

The noises Will was making alternated between deep groans and high, keening mewls that he was trying hard to keep down. It was a symphony to Hannibal's ears, the crescendo, staccato, and vibrato of his varying pitch created a harmony so lovely that he felt like dying. Or killing.

Definitely killing, he'd kill anyone else that heard this music.

His melody reached a new zenith when Hannibal's lips graced the red tip of his cock. A gasping 'Ah!' passed his lips as Hannibal sank a few inches deeper. Will's hands flew to his head, one buried in his hair, the other dug nails into his neck.

Hannibal lost himself in the taste- salt, life, and metal from the open wound in his mouth. It stung in the best way possible, it reminded him he was trapping Will inside his bloodstream, keeping him safe inside his body.

He knew how he must look, hunched over, lips strained around Will's cock, covered in blood. Utterly debauched, all traces of a poised air gone as he fought down a gag as it hit the back of his throat.

He didn't care. Being able to consume Will's pleasure was worth far more to him than maintaining his human veil. His nails raked down one of Will's strong thighs as he worked around his cock, swallowing down every bead of precum.

“Ha-Hannibal I’m-!” Will tried to pull at his hair in a meager warning, but he stayed resolutely around him, his release coated his throat, mingling with the traces of blood and saliva.

For a moment, he held Will’s softening cock in his mouth, caressing it gently with his tongue in order to feel the overstimulated aftershocks. He carefully detached himself and trailed kisses back up the path he followed down, not before noticing the sight of Will’s cock stained with his blood, and carefully committing the image to memory.

Will’s body, trapped underneath his weight still, twitched and spasmed slightly as he gathered himself back from the brink.

He sighed, long, heavy, and sweet, before skating his hand between Hannibal’s thighs. His nimble fingers pressed and pulled at Hannibal's flesh and muscle before cupping his cock in a caress that was far too gentle for an encounter between the two of them.

He closed his fist around Will’s, tightening his grip, though it was Will who gasped in response.

The pumps were slow and jerky at first, but he felt the moment Will relaxed into the motion, his rhythm turned smooth and intoxicating. A throaty groan worked its way from his chest and his head dropped down to rest on Will’s shoulder. He mouthed at his bared trapezius muscle, he could so easily tear out a thick chunk of skin, blood, and tissue- he already knew the exquisite taste of his beloved.

His teeth dug in a little further and Will’s grip tightened in response, their simultaneous gasps of pleasure cut through the relative quiet of the room.

“I want-” Will cut himself off as he released his hold on his cock to push at Hannibal's shoulder. He let the flesh free from his teeth as Will rolled them once more.

From this new position, he could see the state Will had fallen into. His body was completely flushed, hot blood coursing through his veins tinted his skin a teasing pink that complimented the line of drying blood that spanned the entire length of his torso. It almost looked like the clean bloom in the trail of his scalpel.

He still wanted to peel away Will’s layers, expose his innards so he could dig his fingers into every part of the beautiful man above him. But for once, his desire to experience another person’s life outweighed his anticipation to experience the unique beauty of their death. Not only would it be a waste of aesthetics to reduce the man to a corpse, but Hannibal knew he'd be affected, deeply. Will had navigated his way into the central chambers of Hannibal's memory palace and instilled himself as a permanent fixture.

Hannibal wouldn't even need a full hand of fingers to count how many people had gained a similar status. None within the past three decades.

Will’s forceful hands snapped him out of his reviere, they pushed his chest flat on the bed as he straddled Hannibal's thighs. He must've been aching after his release, but he still ground his spent cock against Hannibal's, he could feel it twitch against him.

One hand reached towards his lips, wiping away the blood that wasn't quite clotted yet. He drug his hand to knead into Hannibal's thigh as he ground down. "I'd like to fuck you, is that something you'd enjoy?"

"Yes." The thought of Will inside him was utterly overwhelming.

"You'll hold on until I can go again, won't you?"

For once, he was at a loss of words, it was all he could do to nod. Will clearly picked up on it, that dangerous smirk was plastered on his lips once again. He reached for the nightstand, Hannibal didn't have to tell him what he'd find inside. The hand that wasn't reaching for the small jar of lubricant dug into the flesh that coated his ribs, right above his heart. Red nail marks would certainly bloom underneath his fingertips, he wondered if Will could feel the subtle jump it gave every time he abused the sensitive skin.

One wet finger pressed inside him, Will's tongue drove into his mouth, tasting the mixture of blood and saliva. He drove the finger slowly, offset by hard bites and the slick caress of his tongue.

His movements weren't gentle, especially not when he added another finger, but they were achingly slow, keeping him on the edge of release but never too close to the threshold.

Pressure mounted with no end in sight. Every twitch of Will's gradually hardening cock sent sparks of anticipation through him. He felt like he'd lost control of his body, reduced to animal instinct- nothing mattered but conflicting desires of consumption.

Another finger slipped inside, Hannibal's teeth turned insistent on his neck. The contingencies he'd placed within his own skull sounded every mental alarm he had, his veil was fluttering in the gail of Will's desire. Worst of all, was that he wanted it blown back, he wanted Will to see him in his entirety, the impulse was harder to deny now with the man grinding down into him like he was just as desperate to merge them into one being.

After what felt like an eternity of pulsing, slow caresses, he felt the blunt head of Will's cock press up against him. One of his hands came down to fist at the sheets underneath them in an attempt to control his own erratic movements, his other hand mirrored the motion in the muscle of Will's back.

His veil crumbled to dust the moment Will pushed inside. He was slow but insistent, the heavy drag inside him snapped the meager control he had left. Will's eye contact was just as punishing as the snap of his hips, he drank in every feeling, every hidden emotion, the scent of every desire muted by neutrality.

It wasn't often that Hannibal lost the battle of holding a gaze, but Will has always been his exception. He buried his face in the crook of Will's shoulder and crushed them together, fantasies of splitting and merging danced behind his eyelids and Will chased his second release.

He knew he'd let his monster through, he knew that Will had to have picked up something with that beautiful mind of his. At the moment, he couldn't bring himself to care, not with

Will’s motions becoming more and more frantic, his pants and groans filling up the room.

He felt *desired.* Not a new feeling by a long stretch of the imagination, but Will’s was so much more encompassing. He offered his desire to Hannibal along with Hannibal’s monster, the sweetest gift he could possibly give.

It was too much. Will only thrust harder when Hannibal shed his person suit, and it was so much more than enough. His release coated both their stomachs where they were pressed close together, Will didn’t let up for a second.

A few more minutes of overstimulation and frantic thrusts and Will followed him over the edge, collapsing indelicately into him. It would be proper to get the two of them clean, blood, sweat, and release still sat tacky on their skin, but at the moment Hannibal couldn’t be bothered. He relished the sore evidence of their mutual consumption and basked in this momentary understanding for as long as it might last.

Will had seen another modicum of his darkness, it wouldn’t be long now before the pieces all fell into place.

Chapter End Notes

im sry its been so long augh it takes me 5 literal years to write prn

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He'd been very specific about every little detail, but left the who and how entirely up to her. The last week had been thrilling, Abigail felt alive and grounded in the present, a stark contrast to her days in 'recovery' where she couldn't escape her trauma for a second.

She now knew what Hannibal meant when he said that she shouldn't try to forget her upbringing, but instead turn it into a strength. Her instincts that she cultivated over years of living in her father's shadow made this hunt familiar. Not necessarily easy, but she knew what to watch out for and what to avoid.

Dr. David Barraclaugh was a tall man, thin and spindly, with a mouth in a permanent grin. He was also one of the only male doctors at Port Haven. He'd only worked with Abigail a couple of times, but he'd epitomized everything she hated about the institution.

She could still hear him say 'your father' in his condescending, infantilizing tone.

Honestly, the easiest part was taking him. It was far more difficult to track him, learn his habits, and find when he would be alone, but tonight she had everything accounted for. She was a good shot, the silenced tranquilizer pierced his neck as soon as he unlocked his front door.

The neighbors' windows were dark and there were no cameras in this suburb; it was far enough from the city that break-ins were virtually non-existent.

It wasn't that difficult to drag him inside. The tranq wouldn't last long, but the syringe in her jacket pocket would keep him under until she needed him. Lifting his dead weight wasn't much different from dragging along deer corpses, though her months in the institution had weakened the thin muscle she'd painstakingly developed over the years. She put him in his own bed, careful to only touch his belongings with the leather of her gloves.

The drug would wear off in about 4 hours, she had plenty of time to do what she needed to.

Her next stop was his kitchen, she made something quick and rudimentary, careful to not leave behind a single hair or strand of fabric. She decorated a plate with crumbs from the meal and a few wayward skin cells from the unconscious man. The food itself was taken with her as she left, she checked the digital clock on his microwave on her way out.

She left then, careful to avoid any door cams and stray neighbors as she drove away. She'd be back soon enough, but this was the tricky part, she had to make her way to a more populated part of the city without showing up on any street cams.

Luckily her route was already planned out. She looped around so she'd show up as coming from the direction of Chandler Street as she made her way to the shopping district. This was

the most tedious portion of her night, pretending to have an interest in the purchases she made. A few department store bags filled her arms as she criss-crossed in front of the security cameras, the receipts tucked neatly inside.

After about two hours she loaded her car and made her way back towards Chandler Street, there were few cams here but it was important that her car was seen heading this direction. She texted Hannibal ‘on my way home now’.

Will’s aging Chrysler sat in the driveway, she parked on the street and left her bags no further inside the house than just beyond the door. She felt jittery, excited as she left once again.

There was another car stashed a couple streets down, a truck- black, sleek, and perfect for off-roading, and it wasn’t under her or Hannibal’s names. She didn’t turn on the headlights until she was on the highway, making her way back to Barraclaugh’s home.

One more hour until the drug began to wear off. She changed in the truck, discarding her clothing for something more utilitarian, though she kept the leather gloves. It was the gear she’d wear when she went hunting, it would work just as well now.

Dr. Barraclaugh was sleeping soundly when she returned for him. She envied Hannibal’s upper body strength as she drug the unconscious man to the bed of the truck. It was late now, the sun was down and no one would be outside to witness. She threw a tarp over the doctor and took off into the night.

Forty-five minutes now until he awoke, but her destination was only a half hour away. She heaved a sigh of relief, she’d executed every aspect perfectly so far. It helped that she’d been repeating the schedule to herself religiously for the last week. Her alibi was secure and they wouldn’t find Barraclaugh’s body to confirm his actual time of death.

Now she’d finally receive her sweet payoff, this kill would be entirely her own, free of any influence. Hannibal had helped keep her free and safe, given her a place to perform the execution, but she had chosen the victim, chosen the method, and now she would get to enact her design. She gripped the wheel just a little tighter, she knew if she caught her eyes in the rearview mirror, she’d see something she didn’t recognize- more wild and violent than she ever allowed herself to be.

She turned off the highway to some no-name backroads, it wasn’t much further now. There were no streetlights this far out of Baltimore, the only stray beams came from the occasional passing car, but those were becoming less and less frequent the further she drove.

A grown-over gravel drive came into view, hidden between the trees on a backroad of a backroad. They pressed in thick, it was difficult to keep track of the road in all the undergrowth. She kept driving until the road was a long way from visible and veered off the gravel path, slowly deeper and deeper into the forest, high beams on.

Finally deep enough, she turned out the lights and cut the ignition. Her rifle- no longer loaded with tranqs- and a set of knives sat in the passenger seat. Nothing else of use was stashed in the truck, so she made her way into brambles as her eyes adjusted to the low light. The moon was bright overhead, but much of its light was lost in the canopy.

Only a few minutes more, she crouched low in the brush and kept her eyes on the truck, its metal surface easily discernible in the few beams of moonlight that trickled down. She was utterly silent as she waited for her prey to regain consciousness.

She'd told Will before that she didn't think she could hunt again, that the memories of her father would choke her.

How wrong she'd been.

Her hands were steady, the scope didn't move an inch as she trained her focus on the subtly shifting tarp. She wasn't weak, she was so much stronger than this man who dared to pity her. He saw every girl in that institution as scared little rabbits, but it was his turn to be frightened, to flee in fear from the sweet face he dared see as harmless.

Her gun wasn't silenced anymore, but she was used to the sound. This rabbit wouldn't be.

The tarp shifted again, the quiet of the forest was interrupted by the loud sound of the plastic rustling as Dr. Barraclaugh fought to free himself from its confines. His breathing was harsh and quick when he finally emerged from the truck bed.

She wondered if he would scream or try to flee. His behavior was so much more interesting to witness than deer. Each one of his steps was careful and muted, though still loud enough to track easily, this man wasn't used to concealing his presence, especially not in this terrain. His head turned on a swivel, examining the forest around him with fear so palpable she could taste it; she made no move to pull the trigger, this was far too fun to end the hunt early.

He pulled open the front door of the truck, the keys were in her pocket, but she supposed it wasn't the worst idea for him to at least check. Though he did turn on the interior lights, which would really only serve to ruin his night vision.

She smiled as she heard him gasp, he must've found the empty gun case in the passenger seat. She wondered what he thought of the multiple empty coolers in the back.

More desperate sounds of rummaging and cut-off curses came from his direction, soon he'd see it was useless, he'd have to start running if he wanted to make it out of here. She retreated deeper into the brush, careful to not step on any twigs or dry leaves that might alert him to her location.

After another ten minutes, he left the vehicle. He glanced around again, but she was too concealed for his eyes, now entirely unaccustomed to the darkness. His steps were loud and clunky as he darted off further into the woods, it was easy to follow him.

She turned off the interior lights before she pursued. It seemed wrong to have any light shed on tonight's hunt.

He crashed through the trees as she followed, quick as he could, but not quick enough to outpace her. His feet were clumsy and prone to tripping often where hers were sure and silent, he hadn't noticed her presence yet and was starting to calm now that he was away from the truck, away from the perceived presence of the person who brought him here.

He came to a stuttered halt in front of a creek, his shoes sank into the muddy bank. His pale skin showed clearly in the light of the moon and reflection in the water.

Abigail lined up her shot as he freed his foot. The worst thing a hunter could do when their prey was at a stand still was hesitate, so she carefully looked through her scope and squeezed the trigger.

The loud ring in her ears was almost comforting, a spark of red-tinted nostalgia. The man went down with a shout, though she knew he wasn't dead- she only was aiming for his shoulder.

He cried out again, louder than the initial impact. The doctor grabbed his shoulder where the bullet pierced him, his gasps of pain were intense and desperate.

His legs shook underneath him when he regained his footing, but he'd stopped crying out- at least he had a little sense in him.

She let him run on for a few more minutes. Her rifle was reloaded and cocked as she pursued. This was even more invigorating and so much more satisfying than slicing into that bound woman in Hannibal's cellar, the possibility of escape made the prey that much more satisfying to catch.

It was quite a few minutes before she got the chance to line up another shot. Adrenaline must've been coursing through the man's system, numbing the pain in his shoulder and urging his legs on. But he could only run blindly for so long. She knew that there were a few instances where her footsteps were loud enough to be heard by the fleeing man, each time his head desperately whipped in her direction, but of course, she was already gone to the next shadow before he could discern her form.

He was almost back in the small clearing that contained the truck. In all his frantic running he'd only managed to make a large loop, the look on his face when he realized was something that would sit with Abigail the rest of her life.

How was it only now, after she'd gutted two people and was on her way to tearing up another, that she realized that she might have a bit of a sadistic streak. His expression should have triggered something in her very human heart, but the tears streaming down his face only served to make him seem so very *weak.*

She fired another shot, this time it hit him in the thigh. He went down a few yards away from the truck, though that wouldn't be enough to kill him.

He wouldn't be going anywhere now, he wasn't used to having to survive while injured. Even if his leg wasn't damaged, he'd be perfectly slow, slow enough that she no longer had to keep her distance behind her gun.

She let herself come into full view as she placed the gun back into the passenger's seat. It's possible that the man might not even recognize her.

His eyes widened as she stalked closer, he was bleeding profusely from both his wounds. There were also smaller scrapes on his hands and knees from the terrain he'd been fighting against all night. Abigail approached, her thick jacket concealing her array of hunting knives, and pulled out one that was jagged and wickedly sharp.

"Oh God, please don't! Please I won't tell anyone, just let me go!" Pained gasps interrupted his words as he desperately tried to scramble back and away from her. A patch of moonlight illuminated her face for just a second and she could see recognition bloom across his features. "A-Abigail Hobbs? Wait please, don't do this!"

He was about to say something else but she kicked him hard in his thigh, right where her bullet pierced him. A wheeze forced its way from his throat and she descended upon him in an instant, plunging her knife straight down into his chest.

She drove it through his ribs, he gasped and screamed as flesh, muscle, and bone parted around her knife. His thrashes became more and more weak as she twisted, curiously poking the sinew as blood soaked her hand.

Weakness was a far off feeling as her hands became coated in viscera. She ripped off her glove and forced her hand inside the hole she left and felt the moment his heart stopped beating.

She breathed in deeply, the air thick with the scent of blood and the sweet taste of natural oxygen. Her prey was dead and now it was her chance to show just how much stronger she was than her kill.

———

He was alone in Hannibal's room when he woke. That wasn't unusual, his partner was an early riser and liked to have breakfast made by the time Will ventured downstairs.

The other side of the bed was still warm, he hadn't been gone long, though it was well past sunrise. He wondered how long Hannibal had watched him sleep, the thought should have been disconcerting, but honestly he only found the attention comforting.

He flopped over and spread his limbs across the space, the smell of sex had been cleaned from the room the night before, but the scent of another person lingered. It was relaxing in the same way the scent of his dogs' musk was, it was the scent of safety, devotion.

Eventually his bladder and need for company lured him out of the warm sheets. He quickly threw on a t-shirt and loose pair of sweatpants that felt as soft as goose down.

Hannibal didn't even wear sweatpants, why did he need a pair that probably cost more than Will's utility bill.

A knock sounded when Will was about halfway down the stairs. Hopefully it was just some Jehovah's witnesses or something, if he was quick enough he might be able to persuade Hannibal to not answer.

He intercepted him coming out of the kitchen, apron still tight around his hips. Will snagged the drawstring and pulled him chest to chest, effectively cutting off his route to the front door.

“Mornin’.”

Hannibal's nostrils flared and his eyes softened. “Good morning, Will. I trust you slept well?”

“I did. Would've slept better if you quit running away before I woke up.”

“Though you are a vision in the morning Will, the day starts with or without us and I can only spend so many hours cataloging the sounds you make while you sleep.”

“It can’t be that bad a pastime, you watch me almost every morning.”

“You’ve caught me.” One of his hands came to rest on the back of Will’s neck. “Now what punishment should I expect?”

Before Will could respond with something even more salacious, another knock interrupted him. Hannibal gently broke free of his grasp with an apologetic smile.

“Unfortunately, it seems my attention is demanded elsewhere.”

Will caught up to him in a couple quick strides. This time he more securely threw an arm around his waist and hooked his chin over his shoulder.

“Ignore it, it's probably not important anyway.” He felt the other man relax in his hold as he trailed his lips over the delicate patch of skin behind his ear, just a bit more and he’d have him.

A third knock sounded before he could launch his next attack, apparently he was outmatched this morning.

“I’ll be back in a moment, it's awfully rude to keep a guest waiting.”

“Can’t have that, can we?” Reluctantly, he let Hannibal go and retreated to the kitchen, it would inevitably be where they ended up in any case.

There was a pan of something on the stove, set to a low simmer. He was just about to go see what it was when a very familiar cadence trailed in from the front door.

“What are you doing here, Jack?” The agent seemed both relieved and slightly uncomfortable to see Will emerge into his line of sight.

“Good morning to you too.”

“You don’t make personal visits, so you either want me at a scene or you want him to try to diagnose one of your suspects.”

“You’re getting rusty, Will. I’m actually here to verify the whereabouts of Abigail Hobbs last night.”

“What?” After everything, Jack was still trying to condemn her? “She was here, obviously.” He couldn’t help the potent disdain that oozed out of his tone.

“All evening?”

“She was out for a few hours on her own, but she returned afterwards. She’s upstairs now. What is this about?” Hannibal seemed just as upset as he was, his mask was much more thin than usual, thin enough that even Jack might be able to sense his irritation.

“Well, where was she when she was ‘out’?”

Hannibal pointedly gestured to the multiple full shopping bags that were perched at Jack’s feet, just beyond the threshold of the front door. “Right where she said she was going. What is she being accused of?”

“Nothing, as long as her whereabouts can be confirmed. Did she keep the receipts?”

“I’m not in the practice of tracking my charge’s purchases, but you’re welcome to check if you need to prove her innocence.”

“Thank you.” His responses were clipped and strained, immediately he started digging through the various bags, pulling out the receipts that were hidden between ripped jeans and low necked sweaters. He still hadn’t mentioned what brought him here in the first place.

“Jack, what’s going on? You can’t just come in here and-”

“Two of the staff of Port Haven have gone missing, both after Abigail Hobbs was released. Both had come into contact with her at some point while she was institutionalized. You can understand my suspicion.”

“No Jack, I can’t. What do you think she’s done? She’s not a killer, I would’ve thought you’d let that train go by now.”

“We still haven’t found who killed Nicolas Boyle and I’m not entirely convinced she’s innocent. You told me yourself that she hated the institution, she’s got a motive.”

Will couldn’t deny the pure hate he saw in her eyes when she regarded the hospital staff, but there’s no way she was responsible for this. He would have noticed something, *Hannibal* would have noticed something. Jack was just pointing at an easy target.

“She doesn’t have a motive, she just wanted out and she got out. The last thing she’d do is seek out anyone from there.” Will didn’t want to believe she would at least.

Soft footsteps padded from behind him, she was clad in a matching striped pajama set.

“Abigail Hobbs,” Jack pushed his way between him and Hannibal to beeline for the girl still rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Where were you last night?”

“Jack-” Will saw Hannibal’s hand twitch at his side, the closest thing to a physical reaction the man would show.

“I’m asking Abigail. Now, could you please tell me your whereabouts yesterday evening?”

She froze like a deer in headlights. He hated the way Jack used his statue to tower over her, but the man was an experienced interrogator, he knew how to get a confession from almost any type of suspect.

“I was here. I went to a couple stores and came back. That’s it.” Will couldn’t help but admire how she held Jack’s gaze.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And both of you will corroborate?”

“Yes.” He and Hannibal answered in tandem, similar convictions in their tones.

“Then I have no further questions.” He pocketed the receipts and took a picture of her license plate before he left.

The look she shot Hannibal was fearful and wide-eyed, he took her hand as she approached.

“What was that about? I thought I wasn’t being investigated anymore?”

“You’re not.” Will knew what the full weight of Hannibal’s eye contact felt like, it was comforting and heavy all at once. It bore down on you like the hard pressure of a masseuse’s hands. “There is no need to be frightened, Abigail. I trust that there is nothing for Jack to find?”

She shook her head and matched his gaze, chin held high.

“Then we shall regard Jack’s presence here as nothing more than a friendly visit. Breakfast is almost ready, it would please me greatly if both of you would accompany me to the kitchen.”

Abigail released a shaky sigh and followed him, she caught Will’s eye for just a moment before she turned away.

Just one small instance of eye contact was all it took. He was violently reminded why he avoided eyes in the first place. Secrets that he resented gaining in the first place revealed themselves to him far too easily.

She was hiding something, he had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what it was.

Chapter End Notes

insert breakdancing tbh creature

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Analytics found traces of corn in the cracks in the resin that coated the bodies. It wouldn't be long until they found their killer now, all they needed to do was follow the stream until they hit farm fields.

The killer was almost caught, Will could taste their triumph right on the horizon, but for once he didn't feel a single shred of excited anticipation.

There was a cacophony of wild thoughts all buzzing around his brain that he had no idea how he was supposed to handle, and not one of them had anything to do with his job, except perhaps dissatisfaction. He could already envision the end to this case, and all he felt was disinterest and *boredom.* The killer would end up in the BSHCI, maximum security, or be sentenced to death by lethal injection, and all Will could think was how wasted it all was.

He was an unofficial agent, he'd been in law enforcement since he was a teenager, he should find faith and satisfaction in the legal system.

All his rationalizations and guilt still couldn't stop the creeping thought that the man's death wouldn't be personal enough, it wouldn't be given the respect and appreciation a death deserved.

He knew he could elevate it. He could give the man the honor of a personal death.

He also knew exactly what these thoughts were.

Killers were never satisfied. They escalated, it was a pattern almost every accomplished criminal followed, and he wasn't blind enough to miss the signs in himself.

Killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs felt righteous, cleansing even at the beginning of his bouts of sickness. Killing Abel Gideon was a proud measure of protection- not only was it necessary to keep his family safe, it was a *release.* He couldn't deny to himself that it was satisfying.

Will wanted to kill the man they were pursuing. He might even be able to justify it with another self-defense charge. And it scared him.

His students listened to his current lecture while his hindbrain wandered and worried. They gave him the same ardent attention they always did. He wasn't the easiest professor at Quantico, but his lecture hall was always full, so he had to be doing something right.

The next slide flashed across the screen, this time showing Gideon's corpse, gray on the lab's stainless steel table.

"I know most of you are aiming to become active agents. The reality of this work is that death and killing will follow you outside these walls." He clicked to the next slide- Gideon's

body, tagged and bleeding out in Hannibal's dining room.

"When you step into the minds of killers, you make yourself and your loved ones targets."

The *tak tak* of high heels trickled in between the shuffle of papers and students' tapping pencils.

"Think about the desperation plaguing Abel Gideon. Imagine losing your reality, confusing every memory you have with some falsified illusion. You have no family, no one you trust to tell you who you are, only fractures of pieces from the wrong puzzle.

What wouldn't you do to regain a stable reality?"

Alana hovered at the rear door of his classroom, even from his position at the podium he could see her face was grim.

"That's all for today, class is dismissed." He looked back once towards the image on the projector, he could still feel the blood on his hands. It was warm, comforting like the touch of his lover.

It clicked to black as Alana approached, a tablet under her arm.

"Hello Will, you have a minute?"

"That depends, you look like you're gearing up to tell me I have something terminal."

"Not too far off." She turned the tablet towards him. "She *is* a cancer, isn't she?"

A tattlecrime article was pulled up on the screen, a photo of Jack from behind was plastered under the title- *FBI Overlook Suspect in String of Recent Disappearances.* The photo was taken with Jack's hand poised to knock on the tudor-style front door of Hannibal's home. It was posted less than an hour ago.

"Can't cut her out like a tumor."

Alana offered him a half smile that was more of a grimace.

"Her other articles have been bad but this one's…not flattering."

"I can handle her accusations, it's not like I have a reputation to uphold."

"This one's not about you, it's about Abigail."

He swallowed his hot flash of rage in a second. Even though he figured something like this might happen, he didn't expect it so soon, or so crassly done.

It was worse than he pictured, there was nothing explicitly stated, nothing that could back up a libel claim or a cease and desist, but it was full of implications and links to previous articles. She'd written as overtly as she could, almost insulting her audience's intelligence with the conclusions she wanted them to draw.

Abigail knew something, or more likely she'd *done* something. He'd seen how she looked at the Port Haven staff, he didn't want to acknowledge it, but there was something festering in her, begging for release. That still didn't mean he liked Lounds attempting to bury her alive.

He knew the feeling all too well.

His options now were to either turn her over, or protect her with all he could. Before the thought even fully formed, he had his answer.

She stood in the middle of his memory's stream, alongside Hannibal. They were intrinsically linked to him now, he couldn't let either of them go without abandoning a chunk of himself in the process.

Morality was fracturing at the seams. He had a duty to turn her in, it's what a person who was 'good' would do, but what kind of father would he be if he condemned the girl he'd vowed to take in as if she were his own child?

He had to talk to her, Hannibal too. Lounds didn't deserve to interfere, they'd find a way around this.

Will brought up a hand to cover his eyes, dislodging his glasses as he did.

"Something has to be done. She's so young, Alana."

"I know. I've been keeping track of Lounds' last few articles, and they've been gaining a lot of attention- she's just trying to drain that well."

"To what end? I didn't care if she was just writing about me, but this…this is vulgar. Petty. She'd put Abigail's and, by extension, Hannibal's lives at risk. We're lucky that no one's harassed her yet, but they will."

"I know, but there isn't enough here for a libel suit."

"What did Jack say?"

"Nothing. He's still paranoid, but Lounds didn't paint him in the best light either." Jack wouldn't be any help, he'd been suspicious of Abigail since before Nick Boyle died. If he wouldn't be getting help from the FBI, he'd have to take this into his own hands.

Vividly behind his eyes, was the imagined ripper kill of his own creation. Lounds, quiet finally, given far more respect than she deserved in her final resting place.

She was posed as a life-giving goddess, her body would rot away into fertilizer for the encroaching greenery, a direct opposition to herself while alive- she only sought to destroy the life Will was fostering.

"Will..? Are you going to be alright?" She reached a hand out towards him, but seemed to reconsider with her hand hovering in midair.

“Yeah, well no, I mean…I think I have to go home. Talk to her before she sees it from someone else.”

“Jack’s going to want you when they’re ready to move in.”

“He’ll call me when he needs me at the scene. Thanks for telling me.” He forced a grateful smile before following her out of his lecture hall.

“No problem, let me know if I can do anything else, alright? I know I haven’t been that supportive with your involvement in Abigail’s life, but I still want the both of you, well really all three of you, to be happy.”

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to take care of Lounds?”

“If she writes any more, I just might. Wouldn’t that be something? Get an article written about me for a change.” Her teasing little grin actually did put him a bit more at ease.

“The novelty wears off quick.”

“I’m sure it does.” Her smile was warm and accepting, if he was anyone else she would have pulled him into a hug. He was grateful that she didn’t, but maybe soon he’d be comfortable enough in his own skin to reciprocate.

Normally at this time he was either down in the lab or still in his classroom, prepping his next lecture. It didn’t occur to him that Hannibal might still be seeing patients until he only found Abigail behind his front door.

“Will,” Her tone was bright, still sounding unused to happiness. If it was any consolation, he was still unused to coming home to people pleased to see him.

“You’re not usually here this early.”

“Jack won’t need me till later, I figured I’d spend some time here before he ships me off again. What have you been up to?”

“Hannibal’s been teaching me how to draw. And play the harpsichord, don’t tell him but I think it's a little too pretentious.”

“He’s told me about your drawings, he’s very proud. Says you have a knack for it.”

She led him to one of Hannibal’s smaller studies, one with a uniquely light ambiance- pale blue walls and large windows unimpeded by thick curtains. It seemed he let her convert it into a studio. Papers were strewn about, full of rough figures, studies, and abstractions without a defined subject.

“I guess. It’s relaxing, helps me think.” Her fingers slid over a drawing of a young buck, lying on its side. Its head was down and he could see it was surrounded by a pool of blood originating from a wound in its gut. “Reminds me of when we went fishing.”

“We could go again, if you like.”

“I would, like that I mean.”

Will leafed through a few more drawings, she certainly did have talent. They were beautiful, but in the same way his mark was. Each image contained a certain darkness- predators, prey, viscera, and bone overlayed on top of wooded backdrops and sharp bloodshot eyes.

“These are very good. I’m surprised Hannibal hasn’t tried to frame any of them yet.”

“He’s offered, but I won’t let him. It’s embarrassing.”

Will laughed, it was such a *young* thing to say. It was endearing.

“Is he a good teacher?”

“He likes to teach by giving me advice and then letting me struggle. It’s effective, but it's hard to tell if you’re actually doing it right until the piece is finished. Also, I don’t think anyone can actually draw like him- he moves his hand like a robot.”

“It’s interesting to watch, isn’t it? The other day I walked in on him freehanding blueprints, the lines were perfectly straight, even though he wasn’t using any guidelines.”

“He does that with people too. He starts from one side and just moves his pencil until he hits the other. He turns a blank sheet into something beautiful without a single hint of what it could be until you see it's wake.”

“I think he just likes to show off.”

“That too.”

Her laugh tickled his ears, it made him reluctant to say what he was about to. He sighed, letting the drawing flutter out of his grasp and fall back down to her cluttered desk.

“Abigail,” He waited until she turned her gaze towards him, she deserved the naked honesty of eye contact. “You killed those missing doctors, didn’t you?”

She froze then darted her eyes away quickly. It was already too late, he saw the truth deep inside them.

“...Are you going to turn me in?”

“No.” Her shoulders slumped from their tense position. She didn’t say anything, she just distractedly straightened her pencils.

“Why?” Will’s voice wasn’t accusatory, simply curious.

“I wanted to. I felt so weak and powerless when I was in there. They saw me as this traumatized, frightened little girl. They didn’t know what I was capable of. They learned.” He

wanted to find fault in her actions, but he couldn't. He understood her, more intrinsically than he could blame on his empathy.

"Does Hannibal know?"

The fact that she refused to look at him told him all that he needed.

He'd said no more secrets, after Boyle he *promised.* Will was left in the dark *again.*

He wondered if Hannibal had helped her hide these bodies too.

His watch showed it was five minutes until Hannibal's next break in between patients.

"Abby, I… I have to go ." She turned her wide eyes towards him; fear and worry, the easiest emotions for her facial muscles to render, sat firmly in the large portion of his brain that was dedicated to other people's emotions. "I promise I won't go to the FBI with this, I just need some time."

"Okay." He didn't like how soft her voice had become, he wanted to reach out to her, but he just couldn't right now. His thoughts were too jumbled, he needed to talk to Hannibal.

It was fortunate that his work office was attached to his home. Will waited until he couldn't hear voices beyond the door before pushing his way inside.

"Will, it's good to see you bu-"

"How long have you known?"

No change in his expression occurred, but Will didn't expect that it would. Hannibal was marble carved into a man, like a Greek statue. His regal features were not prone to unnecessary movements.

"The week after you killed Abel Gideon. You spent the night in Wolftrap."

That was a couple weeks ago by this point. Hannibal had neglected to tell him for that long. His nails bit into his hands as he clenched them at his sides. All his lover's sweet whispers of dedication and understanding and he couldn't tell Will that the girl they were parenting had killed two innocent people. Will was furious and desperately frustrated, he wasn't sure how he'd made it so long without breaking something.

"That was half a month ago. Did you think I'd run straight to Jack? Do you have that little trust in me? Because I certainly placed too much in you."

He simply exhaled softly and sat at his desk, that same placid expression frozen on his face.

"That's it? No explanations? No excuses?"

"I cannot offer you any that would be satisfactory, Will. The facts are that Abigail murdered those people and I will not be turning her over. You are an agent of the law, the killers you catch are not so different from her."

“She’s not so different from us. We’ve all killed, we all understand the warm intimacy of a corpse we created.”

“That is true, but society will only deem the two of us moral. Will you condemn her?”

“No I…I don’t know.”

He nodded and hummed, like he expected that answer, his mask had still not slipped. Will wanted to claw at his face until the true man he knew was hiding underneath was exposed.

“There is no such thing as morality, Will. We are a collection of tiny allowances and revenges. Abigail took what she was owed and the world will either comply or burn her at the stake. She has the will to force complicity, if the ones she trusts don’t lash her to the wooden beam.”

“Don’t wax about trust when you couldn’t even trust me to protect her. Christ, she doesn’t even need protection, Hannibal. She killed two people!”

“Three. And she does, not the way one might protect a wounded bird, but how one might harbor a dog bred to fight in a gambling ring. You are intimately familiar with what will become of her should you choose the path of morality. I cannot let you do that Will, she’s too precious to me, and I suspect, too precious to you as well.”

He was right, he was always right. How many times would Will have to come to that realization?

“I won’t turn her in, but I…I can’t be here right now. I need time to think.”

He wanted to cross the room, hold Hannibal’s hand or touch his cheek, anything to reassure himself that he wasn’t destroying the only good thing in his life by leaving right now. But it felt like a deep chasm had opened in the floorboards, and Hannibal wasn’t making any efforts to cross it either.

“I won’t stop you. Take the time that you need, your family will wait for you.” If Hannibal was half as good at decimating people with his hands as he was his words, it was no wonder that Budge was rotting in a casket and not him.

Will could only hold his gaze for a few more seconds before he broke, it was too much.

It was all too much. He needed the blank simplicity of his pack to stop his brain from tripping over itself.

He left without another word. Hannibal didn’t follow him. Will knew that he wouldn’t, but couldn’t help the traitorous hope in his chest, and crushing disappointment that followed.

———

No one would appreciate the self control it took to allow Will to leave. He wanted to hold him close, crush him in his arms so he could reach into Will’s chest and rip out the gossamer bindings that held his monster prisoner.

Hannibal wasn't used to gambling his fragile care, he wasn't used to letting it out of the steel trap of his ribcage at all. Will was dangerous and far from predictable, it was one of the reasons he loved him, but his unpredictability left Hannibal vulnerable, which was extremely unnerving.

No matter what his emotions wanted of him though, he had to let Will leave. He wouldn't turn Abigail in and it would be better if he didn't have to work around Will's presence for the next few days.

Will's suffering was exquisite, that hadn't stopped being true, but pleasure on him was so much more ensnaring than the quick injection of despair.

Worse than suffering though, was this non-exposure.

It was shameful to admit, but Hannibal wasn't the best therapist to his last few patients. Of course no one saw through his sympathetic human veil, but he kept becoming distracted by the icey intensity in gray-blue eyes. He was already dreading the lack of a warm body to fill his bed tonight.

He'd always hated the cold.

Abigail was sitting right where he suspected Will left her. Her hands were clutching one of the thin sheets of figures they'd practiced a few days ago. It was crinkled and torn slightly around the edges.

"Will was here." She was staring down at her hands. He wondered if she was simply considering her fists or was imagining them around the handle of a knife.

"I know."

"He said he wouldn't turn me in but…"

"He won't, he cares for you too much."

"I'm not sure he will, after this."

"He is not so attached to public morality that he will forsake you. If he goes to the police, the one beautiful thing in his life will be destroyed."

"Is he going to come back?"

"Eventually. He only left because he saw too much of himself in you. You're the culmination of every impulse he's clipped like the wings of a domesticated fowl. Dear Will believes he must follow a certain path of justice, he's conflicted because he won't."

"He'll want me to stop."

"He'll want a clear conscience, no one can give that to him. What matters more at this moment are your desires and actions. Tell me Abigail, are you satisfied? You've taken three

lives with your own hands now, will typical excitement be enough for you any longer? Would you be able to return to the shy child you once were?"

"I can't. You know that I can't. I'm not scared, not anymore. I won't go back as long as I remember the feeling of blood on my fingers and knowing I was the one who broke their skin and touched their bones."

"No longer the trembling fawn trapped in the snare of your bloodline, it's only natural that you desire to continue seeking your liberation."

"I don't know if I can stop. Jack already suspects me, what am I going to do?"

He brushed her hair back from where it had fallen in front of her face, she didn't flinch, but subtly leaned into the familial touch. It spoke distinctly towards the trust and loyalty she placed in him, hard won but harder to break.

His hand came to rest on her shoulder, he pressed down slightly, just to let her feel the weight.

"Do you trust me, Abigail?" She nodded, firm and without hesitation. "Then trust that I shall not allow any harm to come to you. Now, you've had quite the dramatic day, I believe a measure of repose is in order."

———

Dr. Bloom arrived less than two hours later. As she met her at the front door, Abigail could see her scruffy dog hanging out the back window of her prius.

"Abigail, you look well." It was obvious that Alana was glad to see her, she didn't try to disguise it- she had nothing to hide.

"Thanks. I like living here, Hannibal gives me a lot more freedom than I got at Port Haven."

"I'm glad." She didn't address that she was one of the reasons Abigail ended up there in the first place. "I will say, it's difficult to imagine Hannibal living with someone else."

"Not that hard, I don't think. Will was over almost every night before we got all the papers through."

"He's even worse! Where is Will anyway? I'm surprised he's not here."

Hannibal appeared at her shoulder, finishing buttoning his overcoat. She'd learned to stop being startled by his silent presence.

"Jack has claimed Will's attention for the night, unfortunately. You'll have to console yourself with just the two of us."

"I think I'll manage." She led them to her car, unspoken that they wouldn't stain Hannibal's Bentley with dog hair.

They headed downtown where the shops were all styled in old-timey brickwork, even the chain establishments which kind of ruined the ambiance with colorful, gaudy logos. Apparently Hannibal wanted to patronize a secondhand bookstore in the area.

If she was being honest, she wasn't entirely sure what the point of this trip was.

It felt like a bad joke, like a circus clown giving a lecture at a very important business meeting and she was the only one who thought it strange.

Hannibal was planning something, but whatever it had to do with a friendly jaunt down oldtown Baltimore, she didn't know.

She walked slightly in front of the pair of psychiatrists, gripping Applesauce's leash loosely. She'd asked to hold him, it gave her something to do with her hands. The sidewalks were sporadically populated, weekend foot traffic made for slightly more crowded streets.

A small child slipped from her father's grasp and beelined for the relatively well-trained dog she was handling. The child's wide blue eyes bored into Abigail's, her chubby fingers hovered over the fur as her father caught up to her.

"Remember we have to ask before petting. What do we say?"

Alana's chuckle came from behind her, the dog didn't so much as flinch at the girl's rapid approach.

"Can I pet your puppy, please?" She reached to run her hands through the soft coat before Abigail was able to mutely nod.

"I'm sorry abou…" The father trailed off. He was a short man with dark hair that matched his daughter's and a wide, pleasant face garnished with moles and laugh lines. His jovially exasperated expression morphed into confusion, recognition, and then horror.

Hannibal's hand found its perch on her shoulder, the father's eyes slid off Alana as they darted between the two of them and came to rest on Abigail once again.

He was scared of her, she realized. This random civilian had read about her, recognized her, and was frightened.

"S-Sophie come on, we're late." He picked up his daughter and scuttled away amid her protests. Abigail hadn't even had a chance to speak the entire exchange.

Hannibal squeezed her shoulder and released her, she wondered if Alana had even realized what happened.

"Here, I can take him for a bit." She gave the leash to Alana without a fight, she didn't want to lead the charge anyway.

They continued on without any more interruptions, the streets were still crowded though, so she watched the passing eyes of strangers.

How many double-takes were from people who recognized her? How many were because of the uncovered scar on her neck? She didn't know if her eyes were suddenly opened or if paranoia was taking hold, but she could feel the weight of every gaze. Surely there weren't that many tattlecrime readers, right?

The bookstore offered a quiet contrast to the noise of traffic. She'd never found any real respite in a place that wasn't natural, but she could understand why someone else might find solace here. She wandered near the stack of CDs and records while Alana tied the dog outside and Hannibal approached the till- it sounded like he knew the owner.

She was starting to realize there was a lot of life she'd never experienced. Her father had never seemed the controlling type, but even during simple excursions that resembled this one, he'd be at her side. His influence even tinged the music she gravitated towards.

Her hands skipped past the classic rock albums that she recognized and hovered over blues, metal, pop, and punk. She grabbed a few CDs at random and felt a little ridiculous that she was having this dilemma in the first place.

Her father was dead, she killed three people, and had been adopted by a serial killer. It was a little late for petty teenage rebellion.

"...obbs? I think that's her." Abigail's ears pricked at the whispered conversation coming from behind her. She wouldn't have picked up the soft words if she wasn't attuned to her own name.

She turned to face them, a pair of girls that couldn't be much older than her were looking right at her.

One of them had long dark hair and wide brown eyes. She almost felt the pointed gaze of her father.

They both turned away quickly and shuffled so an aisle blocked them.

A familiar voice cleared its throat from behind her. "Should I invest in a CD player?"

"Those girls recognised me. So did the man with the little kid."

"I noticed."

"Isn't that a problem?"

"Certainly, your safety hinges on blending with the masses." Despite his words, his tone and expression displayed utter indifference.

A slight tremor started in her spine and petered out around her knees, minute enough to stay hidden under her clothing. Hannibal pulled away and left his hands open for the CDs. When she relinquished them, he left her there, unmoored, without a second glance.

She regained enough of her instincts to notice Alana's approach. She was holding a thick novel that seemed to be a collection of short stories.

“Flannery O’Conner, I think you might like her works. I know you don’t remember, but I used to read to you when you were in the hospital.”

“You read to an unconscious girl you’d never spoken to?”

“A story never hurt anyone. I felt it was the least I could do.”

She hummed and turned the book over in her hands. A picture of the author was on the back cover, she was young.

“What…” She wasn’t sure how to phrase her question, she also wasn’t sure why she was asking Alana in the first place. “What do you think I should be doing now?”

“What do you want to be doing? What do you want to change?” Alana didn’t seem to mind the sudden shift of topic.

“I’m not sure. Nothing, I guess.” She watched Hannibal hand over a card to the teenager manning the register, it was the same card he’d let her use the night she killed Dr. Barraclaugh. The heady power that saturated her bloodstream had all but faded at this point, though the memory sent a quick flush through her system. She’d much rather be in the woods hunting right now than here in public, where all these eyes were intent on bearing their scrutiny. “I want the articles to stop.”

“They will with time, it won’t be like this forever.”

“You haven’t been there, you haven’t seen her. She comes to the house, Will’s too, she’s taken pictures of us through the windows- she even stopped Hannibal and me at a grocery store once. I’ve seen the ratings she’s getting, once the other reporters catch wind of it there won’t be anywhere I can hide.”

“Like I said, Abigail, it will pass. There’s nothing for them to find, there will be better stories for them to chase soon.”

“She’s not the only one. Agent Crawford came to the house too.”

Alana’s face pinched in displeasure. “He’s…a bit harder to distract but he won’t detain you without just cause. There are always more killers for him to chase.”

“I hope you’re right.”

They left quickly, she didn’t see the pair of girls on the way out, but she was purposely keeping her head down so she wouldn’t. Their last stop was the corner that contained numerous food trucks which was only a short walk from the bookstore. Applesauce’s trot became more and more jaunty as they approached the strong smell of fatty foods.

It was strange to see Hannibal eat street food, he left the impression that the only time he would allow something into his body was when he could sit at his dining room table and savor it. But to her, and more so Alana’s surprise, he was the one who actually suggested they try something that wasn't from a restaurant with a Michelin star.

She wondered if it was because of Will's influence or whatever scheme he was planning at the moment.

Hopefully this venture wouldn't last much longer. The eyes of other people grated on her, like gnats buzzing around her ears on a windless sunny day.

She didn't notice the man until he collided with her shoulder, hard. A harshly whispered ' *cannibal'* passed his lips as her meal flew from her hands and towards the mud-caked pavement.

The impact was sudden, pointed, and its bearer had at least 70 pounds on her, it was lucky that she stayed upright.

"Abigail!" Alana rushed to her side as the man faded back into the crowd, she never caught his face. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine." It wasn't the same as being attacked, but without a conviction, she knew people would escalate. She might not have the luxury of waiting for the media coverage to die down.

She pulled her arm from Alana's caring grasp and silently lamented the ruined burrito. Applesauce certainly appreciated it though.

Hannibal silently offered his own. He'd gotten the same thing, she couldn't help but think it might've been orchestrated. His expression gave nothing away, as usual, only a simple mask of concern.

"I believe our excursion has lasted long enough, wouldn't you say?" It hadn't been much of an excursion, they probably hadn't been gone longer than 90 minutes, but she wanted to go home, so she didn't protest.

Alana left with a tense expression. She said something to Hannibal in his foyer that Abigail couldn't make out. She looked worried, it made sense that she would be.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Hannibal's face returned to its placid neutrality. She followed him to the kitchen where he began to withdraw ingredients from his fridge and cupboards.

"You said you would protect me."

"Have I failed to do so far?"

"No," She was strong enough to handle some bruises and harsh words. "But people are going to escalate."

"I suppose they will." He arranged a plate of simple fruits, crackers, and cheeses, and filled a small bag with ice.

"What am I going to do?"

“Follow me.” He left the platter where it was and palmed the ice pack, leading her into his spare pantry. Just like the last time she was in here, he quickly found the hidden latch. “Baltimore has not been kind to you, Abigail. You would like a way to leave the heavy chains of your name.”

“Yes, I would.” The sturdy lock slid into place, Hannibal’s expression was reptilian.

He set the bag of ice in a small cooler on one of the sterilized work tables positioned near an upright patient’s chair. Attached was an empty blood bag and an IV.

His face remained utterly passive as he approached her.

“Then I believe it’s time we end the life of Abigail Hobbs.”

Chapter End Notes

what if i eated person i did because i didn't <3

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

read updated tags ;|

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The nights were the worst part. Before this, when he spent the occasional night alone in his bed, he could take solace in the fact that he would sleep well the next night. He missed his family terribly, he couldn't stop using the term if he wanted to.

He didn't want to.

There was so much wrong though, all the secrets kept from him piled up around him until he was drowning in the quicksand. He was a profiler, how could he miss this from the people he knew the most?

Maybe he didn't know them as well as he thought. Maybe he knew the whole time and blocked the image from forming in order to preserve the last shred of normalcy that he had.

The worst of it though, was that he still *didn't care.* He cared that Hannibal hid this from him, but the two lives that Abigail snuffed out barely registered in his conscience. Why didn't he care about their innocence? Why couldn't he bring himself to?

Winston nosed in between his knees as he blankly stared out his living room window. He gave Will's hand small licks until he started to rub the patch of fur behind his ears.

He looked over his pack, his simple, loyal creatures. He wanted to find solace in them, the way he did when he had nothing else, and he still did find comfort in their quiet minds, but they couldn't replace human touch, not now when it'd been so elusive to him for so many years.

Hannibal hurt him, but Hannibal was also the only person on the planet who'd gotten anywhere close to understanding him.

He gave Will space, just like he said he would- Will didn't want space, he wanted to be smothered in his company. It was the silence that was choking him, he hadn't realized how unaccustomed he'd grown to it.

Hannibal wasn't who Will thought, or at least he wasn't what he wanted people to think he was. Will had noticed his high walls since their very first meeting, though most other people would simply say he was politely reserved.

Will knew better, he'd known something was off for a while and simply hadn't wanted to acknowledge it.

Hannibal was dangerous, that was abundantly clear the night he let Will inside him. His mask had truly fallen for perhaps the first time since Will had known him- his emotions were all intense, unnatural, and overwhelmingly violent. They were tinged the same pulsing red of his eyes and highlighted in the same swallowing black as their mark.

He wanted to say it was frightening, and to an extent it was, that Hannibal could hide a heavy part of himself so completely, but in a deeper, truer sense, Will was guiltily thrilled.

It was a similar but elevated feeling to his realization about Hannibal's dinner parties. His subtle cruelty had attracted him. The possibility that that cruelty could be fed by violence had Will enthralled.

He just wasn't sure how far that violence extended. He was certain now that Hannibal had killed before Budge, he just wasn't sure when or in what capacity.

The answer was just beyond his grasp and he was desperate to know it. Despite Hannibal's betrayal, Will still ached to know him, understand every facet of him with no holds barred. It was an unhealthy, obsessive desire, but one that Will was becoming more and more certain that Hannibal in fact wanted to foster rather than shy away from.

Another thought occurred to him as he carded his fingers through the coarse fur. Hannibal probably had far more to do with Abigail's murders than Will originally thought. He was parenting violence into Abigail, he'd endorsed it in Will too.

Will should've wanted to run for the hills, call Jack, or do *anything* besides run back to Hannibal's home, but he came to the conclusion that Hannibal obviously already foreseen.

They were still his family, despite the atrocities that Will was still discovering the scope of. This was something he had to deal with on his own, personally.

Revelations didn't change reality though, and the reality of the situation was that Will had no idea what to do or say. He didn't want to apologize, he wanted answers, and he wasn't sure how to get them.

He wasn't going to ask. For all that he honestly cared about Hannibal, he couldn't expect an unaltered truth.

He needed to investigate, feel the design of the man he'd been ready to pledge his life to. In order to do that he needed to be back in his orbit, inhabiting his haunts, experiencing his emotions. He wasn't sure how he was going to without raising suspicions.

Days passed with no contact. Will went to Quantico, he taught his classes, reviewed cases, and came home to Wolf Trap no closer to figuring out how he should proceed.

The nights were still long and torturous, despite everything he still missed the warm bear trap of Hannibal's arms.

Thursday night, his indecision finally paid off. He'd been home about an hour though it was well after sunset. Long hours at Quantico helped distract him from his screwed up personal life, though he knew some of the team was getting suspicious. He'd been able to fend off any questions so far, but he knew Bev was gearing up for an 'are you sure you're okay?'

Apparently, he was a worse actor than he thought.

His phone buzzed, Pavlovian excitement buzzed through him when he read Hannibal's name in the caller ID. He debated ignoring it anyway, he still wasn't sure what he wanted to say.

He only deliberated for a moment, he still ached to hear the other man's voice.

"Hello?"

"Will…" He sounded slightly breathless. "I wasn't sure you would pick up."

"I wasn't sure I would either."

It was more telling that Hannibal hesitated than if he actually spoke. He was a man that lived on confidence and surety, Will knew he had difficulty forming attachments. Whatever he'd hidden and was continuing to hide, his emotions regarding Will had been genuine.

"I realize that I am going back on my vow to give you space."

"You also promised there wouldn't be any more lies between us, that you wouldn't hide these things from me anymore. Obviously, your word isn't worth a whole lot."

"I suppose that's deserved." He fell silent again, it was strange, him not filling the space. Whether it was with his words or his presence, it was always soothingly overwhelming.

"They weren't in self-defense, Hannibal. I can't protect pre-meditated murder, you know that. And…she doesn't want to stop, does she?"

He took a breath to respond but Will interrupted him before he got the chance.

"No, wait. Don't tell me, it's better if I don't know."

"If that's what you want."

"What I *want* is for none of this to be happening. I want to go back to last week when I was still blind. I wanted a normal family *so much.* I hadn't known I was allowed to have one."

"There was never any normalcy to be found in our home. You've known that since the blossom on your chest unfurled. Rather, you desired stability and acceptance. Abigail wants the same thing."

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I can’t just *ignore* it. God, you ruined me. You know that, right?” He felt like he was drowning, like he always had, but the lifejacket that was supposed to keep him afloat had turned to lead. “I wasn’t solid before I met you, but I’d accepted it. I was almost okay with being alone, with no one understanding me. I had to be, I didn’t know there was another option, but now that I know what it's like to be seen? You knew I couldn’t go back. It’s almost unbearable now, it makes me question how I’d lived this long by myself.”

“It has been a very long time since I cared for someone as deeply as I care about you. The loss of your presence this last week has been equally excruciating.”

“Well you’ve got a funny way of showing it.” He didn’t try to hide the bitterness leaking into his tone. “You know what the worst part is though? I’m not even upset that she killed those people, something broke in me and it's all varying levels of the same morality. Her murders are no different from mine or yours or Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ or the Chesapeake Ripper’s.”

“You know yourself better than to truly believe that. You know that there are deaths deserved and more deaths that aren’t, it’s how you seperate the killing you enjoy from the killing that poisons you. You understand Abigail, you understand how those deaths were deserved.”

“I understand how every killer justified themself, how is she any different?”

“Because she is your family, Will. She may not have burst from your brow, but you willingly possessed the torch when her father cut it from her throat. That loyalty of yours was forged from blood and bronze in those nights at her bedside. She is also a reflection of you.”

“A father should try to pass on his best qualities, not his worst.”

“Strength is not a negative quality, neither are vindication, justice, and retribution. She has long seen herself as the helpless wyrmling- do not deny the sacrifices she made in order to grow her fangs and talons.”

“I don't want to think about sacrifices and moral failings right now. I want to taste your cooking, I want to be able to sleep again.” His voice fell to a low, soft pitch, close to pleading.

“I don't need our every interaction to be filled with talk of death and morality. I can feign ignorance for a night if it meant I was allowed to bask in your presence.”

“I'm not forgiving you, and this doesn't mean I've made a decision, I just…need this. Need you. I don't have anywhere else to go.” He wondered if that was by design too.

“I'll be there in an hour.”

Will hung up without a sign off, he knew it was impolite, but Hannibal would have to forgive his rudeness this once if he wanted to see him.

He didn't want to feel relieved that he would see the other man soon after only a week of separation, but he did. To be entirely honest, it was a tad pathetic, to need someone that much

just to stay stable.

Not for the first time in his life, he cursed fate's cruel twist, but it was done halfheartedly. He couldn't bring himself to truly resent the man who bore his matching omen, not when he was the only man to know, understand, and accept him. Though he wondered now where all that acceptance actually stemmed from.

Will occupied himself with the quiet eyes and simple minds of his dogs for the 55 minutes it took for the crunch of gravel underneath rubber to sound. Buster's ears perked up and his tail began *thump thump* ing on his moth eaten rug. If Will was a canine, he'd probably react the same way. He tried not to think about how diligently he waited by the door, just another one of the pack waiting for his absent master to arrive.

Hannibal knocked on his door; he hadn't knocked since Will had given him his key.

He still wasn't sure what he wanted to say, even with Hannibal standing in front of him. His lips pursed in preparation to speak, but apparently decided against it as he took in Will's expression. Probably the smart move, if he asked to come inside in that vampiric way he had upon their second meeting, Will would have punched him.

Instead Will grabbed the front of his overcoat and pulled him flush with his chest, uncaring of the bunching fabric in his grasp. The contact settled his frayed nerves, especially when Hannibal's arms clamped around him. He'd never craved physicality like this in the past, but now it felt like a necessity.

Maybe he really was touch-starved, or maybe it was a side effect of weird soulmate bullshit, either way, he melted into it.

"I'm still mad at you," he mumbled into Hannibal's shoulder.

"I know." Will could feel the vibrations of his words as he spoke.

"Make me dinner?"

"Of course." Neither moved from the doorway until a few minutes passed.

It'd only been a week, but he'd forgotten how much he just enjoyed being around him. He kept one promise, he didn't try to goad Will into any philosophy while he reacquainted himself with Will's kitchen. He expected the silence to be stifling with words unsaid. But he should've known better by now. Silence with Hannibal was just as intimate as speech, and he was less prone to attempting to get a rise out of Will.

He watched the confident motion of Hannibal's hands as he flitted through the cupboards. Spices, utensils, and cuts of meat that Will had definitely never bought seemed to just appear in his hands. Will didn't move to help tonight, nor was he offered the chance, he was content to sit back and observe. He loved watching Hannibal cook, the attractive confidence paired

with the restrained but often exaggerated movements were sharp reminders of the capability of the man before him.

Though the way he handled a knife now sent his stomach flopping for a few different reasons.

“If…” This was a bad idea. He knew it was a bad idea and he was going to say it anyway. “If you promise not to twist my words, we can talk about it, but I swear, one ‘you made her a killer’ comment and you’re not speaking the rest of the night.”

“I cannot promise that my own biases will not influence my words, everyone has an inner agenda no matter if they claim otherwise, but I will attempt to stay as objective as I am able.”

“What would you do if you were in my position?”

His lips quirked into a small, pained smile. “You’re asking questions you don’t want the answers to.”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t want an answer.”

“I would do exactly as I am now. My commitments lie first with myself and those I care about, the right thing to do is a far off consideration. The right thing according to public morality is even further from my mind, but I’m sure that doesn’t surprise you.”

“No, it doesn’t, but you don’t seem to be the type to be so forgiving if I was the one keeping secrets from you.”

“I am not, that’s true. I suppose I would have found my own way to retaliate.”

“Would you have hurt someone?”

“I would have wanted to.”

“Because you’ve hurt people before.”

“Yes.” His focus stayed resolutely on the stove. The movements of his hands became robotic, not the easy fluidity he typically possessed.

“Would you have hurt me? Or Abigail?”

“Will…”

“Tell me, you owe me that much.”

“...I might have. I would have protected you both from outside harm, but I could not guarantee the rationality of my personal actions.”

“Christ Hannibal, you know how that sounds, right?”

“I am aware. You asked for honesty, I'm being as honest as I know how.”

“You've killed before. Budge wasn't the first.”

“No, he was not.”

“How long?”

“I believe I was eleven, though I'm not certain. Time then was amorphous, composed more of instances and emotion than linear passage.” The onion he was chopping was already diced, but his blade kept slipping through the flesh as his eyes subtly glazed over. If Will didn't know better, he would've worried he’d slice through a finger.

Hannibal didn't offer any more explanation and Will didn't ask for one.

Normally, Hannibal's masks were paper thin, molded to his face so most could not even tell he was donning them, like near-impenetrable carbon nanofibers. The one he wore now was composed of the thick iron of an executioner’s helm. Any pretense of human fragility was locked behind the high walls of his perfectly straight back and hard line of his mouth.

It was the utter lack of microexpressions that allowed Will to read him. The scared, skinny child he'd alluded to didn't seem as distant from the man as it did before.

“That first time you killed, it wasn't accidental. Children can't comprehend morality, but they understand vengeance. Who was taken from you? Your parents?”

He ceased the pretense of chopping and simply clutched the knife like a lifeline. “My sister.”

“You felt justified taking that life, more than that it felt right- doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good.”

“Of course. I'd known nothing more than my isolated home and my family. The outside world was barely larger than the surrounding forest.”

“What else could you do? Revenge was the one bright spark in despair. A core developmental memory was forged in the wake of that first blood you spilled, it was the needed catharsis that you were lacking. Why wouldn't you want to share it with the people around you?”

“You understand my childhood reasoning, Will. I would appreciate it if you did not try to pathologize me as an adult.”

“But it was cathartic, wasn't it? It hasn't stopped feeling that way for you. You felt that childhood elation when you killed Budge. You wanted Abigail to feel the same thing, you wanted *me* to feel the same thing.”

“And didn't you? You told me of a subtle sense of power, righteousness. Is that so different from elation?”

Will saw the moment he regained his sense of control, his veil slipped back on as the iron helm dissipated.

“No, it's not.” Will sidled up behind him as he returned to the pan, he snuck one hand around his hip.

“Will?”

“You know why I'm conflicted.”

“I know it doesn’t feel as wrong to you as it should.”

“And that scares me, I don’t know where this culminates. I don’t know what total acceptance is going to do to me.” The smell of browning meat and vegetables flowed around him in a sweet miasma. It felt like Will was speaking about one man while embracing another, but there really was no divide. He couldn’t catalog which facet of him he was experiencing until he saw him in retrospect.

“Cessation will cause more pain than a hypothetical. Isolation will poison you, it kills.”

“So do you, so does Abigail.” His tone was halfway between teasing and concern.

Hannibal fixed him with a pointed stare.

“So do I,” Will reluctantly admitted.

He buried his face into the juncture between Hannibal's neck and shoulder. The crisp dress shirt he wore wasn't soft against his skin, but softness wasn't a descriptor that fit him anyway.

“I’m breaking the law by taking no action. I’d lose my job, might even go to prison.”

“Abigail would be tried as an adult. They’d likely declare her insane, she’d spend the rest of her life in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane if she’s not given the death sentence. You are intimately familiar with the law, you are already aware of the consequences.”

“Just trying to put it in perspective. You’re asking a lot from me.”

“More than you desire to give?”

“No. I still want to protect her. I still want to take her fishing and eat the breakfast you made and return to a home with *people.* I didn’t believe I was allowed a child, I didn’t know I was allowed to even wish for one.”

“Our daughter is not a fiction or a mere theoretical. The imagined child of your ideal fantasy was stolen from her crib and replaced with an infant changeling. Fairytale fathers are not often kind when they realize their perfect progeny has been altered.”

“You’re veering close to philosophy, doctor.” He pinched the skin at Hannibal’s side in warning. “I won’t abandon and I won’t retaliate, how can I fault her for acting on the same desires I possess every day?”

“Then why keep your distance?”

“Fear. The stag still stalks my dreams, I know what he wants.” He pressed his lips to the tender skin of Hannibal’s neck. “He only speaks in huffs and bellows, but if he were capable of speech, I wonder if his voice would sound like yours.”

“You described the stag as a manifestation of the culmination of your depraved impulses. Is that what I want from you?”

“You want me unrestrained. You’re still hiding something from me, but you’ve dropped most of your socially acceptable veneer.” The gentle caress of his lips turned sharp, one knot of held back frustration loosened. A deep exhale wormed its way from Hannibal’s chest, the smallest loss of composure. “Show it to me, I can contain you. Fate promised us understanding, quit hiding your design from me.”

Will could feel his ragged breaths from his position plastered against him, masks crumbled and were remade quickly, full of holes.

“Not yet. Soon, but not yet.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“The culmination. You’re so lovely when you’re curious, Will. Can you blame me for drawing it out?”

“You’ve hurt me before with things left unsaid, are you planning to hurt me again?”

“Pain has always been tied to our intimacy, each hit of oxytocin has been proceeded by the sting of your needle.”

“You are planning on hurting me, and this time you want it to scar. What if it's too much? What if I decide mundane isolation is preferable?”

“Fate already decided you wouldn’t, she’s been good to me in the past so I am not one to deny her.”

“Will you be kind to me tonight? Would you touch my cheek sweetly before you stab me in the gut?”

He turned from the stove to face him. One hand reached to cradle his cheek while the other covered Will’s own still residing on his hip, no glint of a knife in sight.

“I will be as gentle as I know how.” His lips found Will’s own in the softest press he’d ever bestowed. His sharp teeth were safely caged by the chastity of his current desire.

Dinner was a simple affair. Hannibal claimed the greens were slightly overcooked but Will couldn’t tell the difference, it was still delicious. Despite the obvious high quality, the food

itself was a passing consideration. His attention was firmly on the heated glances Hannibal kept shooting him over every restrained bite.

It was hard to imagine that Hannibal would stay gentle, especially considering that Will had no intention to. He was going to hurt him, Will wasn't sure how or when, other than it would be soon, and that it would be the final barrier they had to cross before true knowing.

Will would hurt him too then, tonight, before the other man had the chance to strike first. Not that it would matter, Hannibal would probably enjoy every second.

He neglected to help clean, instead he fed the dogs and let them outside. The night was unseasonably warm and they knew not to wander too close to the road. They would be fine for a few hours, though Will would have to check their coats when he let them back in for ticks and burrs. The last thing he needed now was curious noses picking up the scent of freshly spilled blood, there would be far more than a small trickle.

Hannibal gave him a questioning look as Will bustled back and forth. The table was cleared and the dishes were soaking, so he watched amusedly as Will stripped the comforter and tie blankets from his bed and replaced them with a few bathroom towels.

Will returned to the kitchen to fill a bowl with warm water.

"Anything I can help with?"

"Yes. Pick a knife, small but sharp. Clean and disinfect it."

He complied without a second of consideration, treating his task with the utmost importance. Will found a rag and a roll of bandages and butterfly tape in the bathroom, they'd need it for cleanup.

After a second of consideration, he grabbed a needle and thread. It wasn't surgical grade, it wasn't meant to dissolve, but it would do. He'd had to use it on his dogs once or twice before, and on himself on rare occasions. It'd been safer than going to a vet- the nearest one was almost 45 minutes away, the nearest hospital even further.

He passed over the needle and thread to Hannibal, who'd finished with the knife. "Disinfect these too." His eyebrows raised a fraction, his obvious surprise drew Will's mouth into a satisfied smirk. He liked throwing Hannibal off balance.

Preparations complete, he sat on his bed, covered in towels, and divested himself of his shirt quickly. Tonight wasn't about teasing and gradual reveals, it was a test, one that he wasn't sure if he wanted Hannibal to pass or fail.

Hannibal appeared in the open archway separating the living room Will's bed was in from the kitchen. His hands were full of the items Will had tasked him with cleaning.

"Give me the knife and put the other stuff on the dresser. Then take off your clothes and lay down."

He nodded and complied once again. “May I ask what you’re planning, Will? I have a fair idea, but I’d like to know your intentions.”

“You told me you would stay gentle tonight. I don’t believe you. I’m going to hurt you and you’re going to prove to me whether or not you can restrain yourself.” Will turned the knife over in his palm. It was small, like he requested, and the blade was smooth and slightly curved. The edge came to a fine point, it almost drew blood when he pressed it into his thumb. ”Would you allow me that?”

His eyes blew wide, Will couldn’t see a shred of red as he breathed out an awed *“yes.”*

“I’m going to cut deep, Hannibal. You will need bandages, you might need stitches. I’m going to cut where it’s noticeable, people will ask.”

“Let them. I wished our mark would never stop growing. You are just as beautiful when you’re bestowing pain as you are when you’re receiving it, I’d feel honored to be stripped to ribbons at your hands.”

He folded his dress shirt as he set it aside, same with his slacks, socks, and even his belt. Even when he was being obedient, he had to get in his own little barbs.

“Take off everything. You will hide nothing from my knife or we won’t be doing this at all.”

Will watched his half-hard cock jump in reaction to his words as Hannibal discarded his last piece of clothing . He didn’t hesitate joining Will on the bed. “I’m going to start with your back. Don’t touch yourself.”

“May I touch you?”

“Yes, as long as you don’t get in the way of the knife.” He gave another of those half-nod half-bows and laid face down across the towels. The material was probably a bit rough against his sensitive skin, but less comfort would only be for the better. His head was pillowed in his folded arms so he could still watch Will with eyes half-lidded.

Will kicked off his jeans and straddled him, his knife was positioned near the base of his hairline on the back of his neck. The first cut sliced the tip of a few strands as a shallow red line bloomed under the knife. No blood welled up, Will hadn’t put real pressure behind it, just dragged it along the patch of delicate skin. Underneath him, he felt Hannibal tense and take in a deep breath, only releasing it when the cool tip of the knife was removed from his neck.

The next cut was a few centimeters down, right where the top of his collar would touch. It’d be irritating in the coming days, especially seeing as his collars were all perfectly tailored to not sit away from his neck. Still no blood welled up in the red line he drew, but it was slightly deeper this time. The cut was slower, Hannibal drew another long breath.

His knife touched his trapezius muscle, right at the juncture between Hannibal’s neck and shoulder. The muscle was tense, he was strung underneath Will like a taut wire. He pressed the sharp edge a little bit deeper than the last few cuts, a tiny bead swelled to the surface as he

dragged the knife to mirrored muscle on the other side of his body. A few beads of blood escaped in its wake as he continued the path, the most at the hiccup in the smooth planes of his skin that was the knobby bone of his spine.

Will dug his fingers into Hannibal's back near the base of his spine to find the bottom of his ribcage. Hannibal turned his face into the pillow to suppress a drawn out groan. His fingers found the smallest floating rib, his knife traced the path of his pointer finger, tracing the rib from his spine outwards.

He repeated the motion on the other side, doing his best to keep the pressure. He could see Hannibal fighting to keep his breath steady, feigning as much aloofness as he could. It started to fall apart as Will continued his way up Hannibal's ribs, each time he dug his knife in a little deeper, drawing out the slice a little longer.

Halfway up, Hannibal's chest was heaving. Blood spilled in slow trickles from the top two cuts. One of his hands had flown backwards to clutch hard at Will's thigh, but every time the touch bordered on bruising, Hannibal would back off. His promise of gentleness hadn't been forgotten in the wake of the bite of the blade.

Will lapped at his most recent cut, the largest and deepest so far. The blood was bright and slick, he couldn't resist a taste. It coated his tongue more thoroughly than in their previous encounters, there was simply more spilling from this cut than their playful nips.

"Will," Hannibal gasped out as he drove his tongue along the broken seam. The hand on his thigh rapidly clenched and unclenched in encouragement.

The last of his cuts along his ribcage ended near the sensitive skin of his armpit. It was deep, near a blood vessel. Blood ran off his skin and onto the towels beneath. He was glad he had the foresight to lay them down. Will sat back on the meat of his thighs to admire his handiwork. They were mostly symmetrical, but Will's hand wasn't perfectly steady- he wasn't the surgeon between the two of them. But it was all the better that it was slightly uneven, Hannibal would be forced to acknowledge that it was Will's inexperienced hand that marked him.

The cuts went all the way down his back, at least half were still bleeding sluggishly. He nicked one of the ones that had clotted with his nail in order to reopen the wound.

He made one last pair of cuts. Deeply, the knife followed the curve of his shoulder blades on each side. Will was careful to avoid any large blood vessels, but that meant he could thrust his knife in even deeper into the muscle. Hannibal's back was proud and densely packed with thick cords of muscle underneath a small layer of fat built up from a life lived on rich foods. There was lots for his blade to dig into.

The man trapped below his thighs twitched and sighed and groaned as the skin parted, it must sting, especially with the slow pace Will was taking.

He set the knife aside for a moment and stripped off his boxers. His cock was hard and aching, Will hadn't even noticed how much he'd been affected. He plastered his chest to Hannibal's back, the hot, wet blood covered his torso, it would be sticky when they parted.

“Turn over,” he whispered. Hannibal nodded and winced as the movement agitated the shallow cuts on his neck.

Slowly, Will unattached himself. The blood was tacky between them, the perfect patterns Will had painstakingly carved had smeared and merged. Will looked down at his own chest, the blood streaked across the black branches, in the low light of the room it looked like it was part of the mark, like it was as large and sprawling as Will had feared it might become.

A patch of red gathered right at the tip of the stag skull, like it was consuming it. Will thought it was fitting.

Hannibal’s expression rapidly flipped back and forth between pleasure and discomfort as he took in the sight of Will covered in his blood and the sensation on his back. The towels weren’t new, they were tattered and rough, they would agitate the open wounds, and Will had no plans to alleviate the discomfort until he was through with him.

He ground his cock against Hannibal’s, pleasure overtook his expression entirely as at least this one pressure was relieved.

His knife started at the tip of his mark, partway up his neck along the jugular vein.

“I imagined this before.”

It seemed to take genuine effort for Hannibal to pant out a response. “W-when, Will?”

“When you were in the back of Sylvestri’s truck. I hadn’t known fate had put us together yet, I was so jealous of that man you saved.” Hannibal’s hand drew up his stomach to land on top of his kidney. “He got to feel you inside him, I was so lonely, I would have taken anything you would give me.”

“I would have given you anything.”

“I wanted to take it from you. I thought fate had offered me the Ripper and I wanted to force fate to offer me you.” Hannibal’s breath caught, Will dug his blade in and followed the tine southward. “I wanted to strap you down to that gurney and carve my mark into your chest, deep so it would scar. I’m almost disappointed that I didn’t have to.” He could feel Hannibal’s cock jump against him, though he wasn’t sure if it was from the path of his knife or his words. If he had to guess, he would say his words, Hannibal was just narcissistic enough to get off on Will’s fantasy.

He pressed the knife deeper, enough to do real damage if he kept this up. “Will-” Another gasp interrupted him. “Will, you hah-had me from the very first moment.”

“I know that now. I was so ashamed at the time.” He followed another set of tines down, his blade traced a path it had already taken, cutting the bleeding wound deeper. “I didn’t know you were cruel back then. I saw your stability, the confident way you moved, how unshakable you were, I wanted to be the one to break you down and rebuild you into a configuration I would be able to fit into. You were a solid chunk of marble I had to take a chisel to.”

Hannibal stroked his hands frantically up and down Will's sides like he wasn't sure where to land them. Will could see how desperately he was trying to control himself, but his breaths were all over the place, his words devolved into chants of *"Will, Will, Will"* when they were distinguishable from mere gasps.

More cuts to the branching antlers, they connected with previous streaks and conglomerated where they connected with the skull. Any deeper and Will would hit the bone of his sternum. Blood was flowing freely, Hannibal's face was flushed, and his cock was hard against Will's own- he had to be feeling lightheaded.

He set the knife aside again. "I want you to open me up. Can you still do that?" Hannibal's eyes flashed to his, despite the overwhelming sensations, he was still starving, as always.

"Y-yes."

"Good." Will retrieved the lube stashed in his nightstand and helped Hannibal slick up his fingers. That's where his kindness ended though, his attention was back on the knife.

He traced the eye sockets and the sharp jut of the jawbone. It looked like the skull itself was bleeding.

One of Hannibal's still-deft fingers pressed inside him, he didn't try to bite back the moan that escaped his lips. *"More,"* he demanded. Another finger slipped inside as soon as the stretch wouldn't be painful.

Will brought one merciful hand to Hannibal's cock, he was close already. That wouldn't do though, Will wasn't done with him.

"Hold on until you're inside me." One of Hannibal's hands slipped from his hip to fist at the towels. His knuckles were red from how hard he was clenching.

He slipped down Hannibal's foreskin to reveal his cock entirely, though it'd been neglected, it was glistening and flushed. It wouldn't need much lube, already pretty slick, but tonight wasn't about the pain Will might experience.

Will brought his knife close to it, he checked Hannibal's eyes for fear, but he only saw wicked excitement.

About halfway down the shaft, he drug the sharp blade across, about as light as his initial cuts to the back of Hannibal's neck. He pressed just slightly harder until blood beaded along his blade. Hannibal's fingers hiccuped inside of him while the man heaved, losing their rhythm. He was doing his best to keep his trembling to a minimum, either to save his shreds of composure or to keep from accidentally pressing the extremely sensitive skin further into Will's blade.

He gave a valiant effort to scissor his fingers back and forth, but he kept faltering his pace as sensation overwhelmed him. Despite Will's thorough distractions, Hannibal was nothing if not a skilled doctor, he'd know how to find Will's prostate blinded and backwards.

Will himself was not unaffected by the image in front of him. Hannibal's bangs were falling beautifully across his brow, his mouth was wide open in gasping pants- he could see his strangely elongated canines from here. Tan skin, the black soulmark, and blood dripping down his chest and off the side of his body, complimented nicely for a stunning color palette. His graceful gruesome image was captivating, Will throbbed knowing it was all his doing. He'd put ever-composed Hannibal in this state and Hannibal had dived in head first- hell he'd probably even thank him.

"Hold on until I finish, you can do that for me, can't you, sweetheart?"

He gave a strained "mhm" that might've been an agreement. It was good enough for Will, he removed Hannibal's fingers and lined up his slicked and bloodied cock. This would sting, it would *hurt* him. Will wanted it to.

He sank down slowly, he could just barely feel the slight divot in the delicate skin, but Hannibal's reaction was a far more solid indicator. His expression was a gorgeous pain-pleasure that twisted and melded into a series of sweet agonies.

Will dug his fingers into the open wound at the center, coating his hand evenly before he brought his fingers back to his mouth. He wasn't sure how Hannibal managed to regain the amount of coordination it required to bear down his arms around Will's shoulders with how much blood he'd lost, but his strength was still staggering. Will swiveled his hips slightly just to feel how that strength shattered.

He was already so wound up, seeing Hannibal this willingly vulnerable was a potent aphrodisiac. From the way Hannibal was trembling, he wouldn't last much longer.

It only took a few small lifts of his hips before Hannibal was tensing beneath him, somehow more strung up than he'd been all evening. The flood of release and hot blood inside him sent Will over his own edge, white ropes landing on the still-flowing cuts. It had to sting, but Hannibal's expression was one of purely violent bliss.

Will pulled himself off as delicately as he could. His own orgasm already had him shaky and uncoordinated, but he'd hurt Hannibal as much as he'd wanted to tonight, so he was mindful of the sensitive strip of skin he was agitating.

To put it mildly, they were a mess. Hannibal's chest contained a thick syrup of blood and release, there was red everywhere Will looked. So much was smeared in between their bodies, there must be almost as much on him as there was on Hannibal.

Before he pulled away to start to clean the mess he made, he licked a stripe up Hannibal's chest, from where his release stained his navel to the deep flowing puncture at his sternum.

He pooled the concoction on his tongue and spooned it into Hannibal's mouth, he hadn't gotten a taste of Will all night, he must be starving.

He groaned again and with surprising strength, despite the blood loss and post-orgasm glaze, he grabbed Will's shoulders once again, keeping him in place.

The afterglow was comprised mostly of clean up. The rag Will brought would be stained pink no matter how many times he washed it. Each wet swipe of the cloth revealed more dark red lines across Hannibal's chest, his back was probably a mess by now.

He couldn't find it within himself to feel guilty, not with the sharp satisfied smile confidently at home upon Hannibal's lips.

"I feel like I could have come up with a better punishment if I knew you were a masochist."

"Rest assured, darling, I derive no pleasure from my own pain."

Will dug a nail into one of the deeper cuts to hear Hannibal softly groan in response. "Yeah, I'm gonna call bullshit."

"Pain from any other hand would be dull and offensive, from you, it is *excruciating.* You're draining my blood and replacing it with ambrosia."

"That's the blood loss talking, I hope you're still this poetic when you're chafing under the collar of all those tailored shirts of yours."

"I'll regard the sensation fondly, this is not the first time you've persuaded my self-preservation instincts to go dormant."

"Am I allowed to ask?"

"Best to leave some mystery, wouldn't you say?"

"I wouldn't, but you're not going to tell me either way."

One of Hannibal's hands found his cheek, fingertips softly trailing along his hairline down to his jaw.

"Soon, but you asked me to be gentle tonight, and truth does not pull her punches."

Will sighed and simply went back to his task. Most of the excess blood was cleared, though his back still needed to be cleaned, Will wouldn't be surprised if some soaked through the towels and onto his bedsheets.

"This is going to need stitches." He pointed at the deepest cut in the center of Hannibal's sternum.

"I can manage, though I would ask you to thread my needle once again." This was the second time Will got to witness Hannibal stitching himself back together. It was no less enchanting having seen it before.

Like the last time, he worked quickly- his hands barely shook despite how obviously rattled he'd been. Will watched him rebuild his mask gradually, like he was laying down its foundation anew after Will thoroughly decimated it.

This was the longest Will had seen it down, he didn't look away for a second. Hannibal still kept his regal affectation, but the authority he wore was more akin to a conqueror than a king. Broad and bare and covered in blood seemed to be the most natural state for him, though it almost felt strange that the blood was his own.

How could Will have ever believed this man had not taken a life? He wore the signifier like war paint smeared across his high cheekbones.

Hannibal wasn't devoid of emotion but for those few moments, Will could *feel* what he actually did. There were depths to him that burned hotter the closer Will got, like the layers of the earth's crust.

His human veil faked emotion well enough to fool most anyone into believing he was a harmless eccentric, but below that was a vast hollow, keeping him unaffected and in control. Subtly distant, he was sealed safely away where nothing had the possibility of touching him.

Will finally saw the scorching beneath, he'd only been given occasional slips in the past, the heated but brief eruptions of geysers, but before Hannibal had been able to recenter himself, Will saw the bubbling, boiling overflow of emotion that he carefully sifted through in order to function in society.

He wanted to drown in it. The sizzles and pops of the churning lava sighed out his name. He wasn't sure if it was a projection of Will's own desire or Hannibal's for him, not that they were much different anyway.

The last brick slid into place as Hannibal set aside the needle. His hands fell lightly on Will's hips as he continued to dress the cuts. Hannibal didn't bother to bring up a mask of feigned emotion- the little he did let through was genuine, but controlled.

Will missed the monster already, he vowed to bring him back and convince Hannibal next time to let him stay.

"Turn around, I still need to look at your back." The towel stuck to him as he moved, he didn't say anything but he winced as the cuts were stretched and agitated.

He stayed upright as Will carefully cleaned, bandaged, and taped the cuts. His hisses of pain sounded an awful lot like sighs of pleasure.

When he was finished, the lines of bandages traced the pattern of his bones hidden by flesh and muscle, it almost looked like he had an exoskeleton.

The towels were almost as ruined as the rag. He debated just throwing the whole lot out, but they would be fine after a bleach treatment, though they might always have a pink tint. He stashed them in the bathroom, soaking in some room temperature water and let the dogs back in.

When Will returned to his bed, Hannibal was still perched on the edge, he was tracing the lines along his chest softly, like he was caressing them. He was staring off into the middle distance, but snapped back to reality when Will joined him on the mattress.

He seemed to consider him for a second before he spoke. “Would you care to go to the symphony with me, Will?”

Will blinked and several seconds passed before he processed what Hannibal said.

“You’re asking me now?”

“I’m afraid there was no elegant time earlier in the evening.”

“I’m still not sure I’ve forgiven you for hiding Abigail’s murders from me, not to mention what I know you’re about to do.”

“The symphony does not require forgiveness, just appreciation.”

“When is it?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“That’s pretty soon.”

One of his hands found Will’s cheek again. “It is.” His words were heavy with implication.

Will swallowed, Hannibal had something planned, it was obvious from his intonation. Their last barrier would fall in the wake of tomorrow’s events- this outing would be the culmination. Of course Hannibal would plan it around culture and classical crescendos, he was a performer through and through.

He debated refusing, simply staying home and avoiding the pitfall Hannibal had clearly set.

Hannibal must have read the defiance on his face. “Aren’t you curious, Will? The performance won’t be one to be missed.”

He already knew there was no other option. In actuality, he was far more curious than he cared to acknowledge and far too desperate to see Hannibal in his bare entirety. “I’ll come, but I don’t have anything to wear.”

“I’ve already purchased you a suit. It’s lying in the back of the car now.” Of course he had, it probably matched the suit he was planning on wearing. Despite his overwhelming apprehension, he couldn’t fight down the subtle thrill of possession the idea sparked in him. For all the man’s hidden wickedness, he was still highly sought after in his social circles, but he was Will’s down to his very marrow. The suits, the cuts, the bites and bruises, they were all possessive signifiers reminiscent of the marks on their chests.

“How long have you had that ready?”

“A few weeks, though it took a fair amount of time for the tailors to finish the alterations.”

“And how did they get my measurements?”

“Dear boy, do you have to ask?” Hannibal had let some of that hot darkness slip through his tone, it sent heat licking up Will’s spine though he was still thoroughly sated.

Despite the weight of words left unsaid, they still fell easily into the sweet press of each other in the dark. Will almost wanted to resent how calm he felt, but Hannibal’s arms lightly trailing down his sides lulled him into the sleep that had been far from his grasp the last week. At this point, did it even matter if the response was Pavlovian?

He drifted off in the enticing cage of Hannibal’s arms. The price Hannibal wanted him to pay must be pretty steep if it would convince Will to forsake this.

Chapter End Notes

sry i havent posted in a hot min here have 8k of weird sex

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The suit fit like a second skin. The fabric was soft and pressed, a midnight blue that paired handsomely with the pale, lighter-than-sky dress shirt Hannibal had apparently also purchased for him. It had French cuffs which meant there was also a pair of tasteful cufflinks that were likely worth more than the down payment of Will's house.

He was somewhat surprised to see that Hannibal's suit was one solid color, though maroon was still a tad more ostentatious than the black tie event called for. However, the color was so dark it reasonably could have been mistaken for black, same as Will's own suit — they wouldn't want to be rude after all.

They wore the same cut, both double-breasted. Their waistcoats had three shining buttons that matched their pair of cufflinks. Will didn't particularly want to consider what they were made of, but he had a suspicion it was real silver or white gold, or at the very least platinum.

He looked sharp, they both did, especially when staged in Will's dusty, rustic home. Before he might've thought Hannibal looked out of place, but he still moved about Will's home with a fluid familiarity. A stray strand of dog hair clung to his pant leg as if to physically signify Will's thoughts.

Hannibal looped a navy blue tie around Will's neck like a lasso, it was patterned in the same color as the fabric so the crosshatch could only be seen at certain angles.

"I'm able to tie my own tie, believe it or not." He made no move to replace Hannibal's hands.

"I know." He tied a quick and efficient single knot — his own was a double windsor, which was a bit too bulky for Will's tastes anyway.

He fussed with the knot for a while after he finished, more of an excuse to keep his hands on Will's chest than anything else.

Will caught a glimpse of them in his bathroom mirror. Hannibal looked handsome, pleased, and *dangerous* adorned in his tux the color of blood in the moonlight. His jaw seemed sharper than usual, the red flecks in his eyes shined just a hair brighter. Will wanted to touch him, he didn't curb the impulse.

He tried not to look at his own reflection else he'd be stuck in incredulity. The man in the mirror was not the man that stared out at him just a few months ago. He stood with his spine straight, his shoulders rolled back, and he knew he held that same dangerous air that Hannibal did. It was a far cry from the angry, slouching recluse that occupied his mirrors for the years before this man strolled into his life and stained his chest.

He broke eye contact with himself and laid his head on Hannibal's shoulder.

"Whatever you're planning tonight…can't it wait?" He knew it couldn't, he also knew he had to at least try.

Hannibal moved Will's hand so it rested on his sternum, he could feel the bandage under the layers of cloth. "And let your frustrations go to waste?"

"It's not frustration to you, it's catharsis. You crave my violence, you were never horrified by my sins because you delighted in them. I was worried for so long that eventually you'd go running for the hills once you realized how easily the visions behind my eyelids translated into action, but I had no reason to worry, did I?"

"I told you before, Will, I savor your darkness. There's a wildfire that sits just below your fingertips that's been fed with only kindling for far too long. I've only ever wanted to witness all that you can become."

Will pulled his hand away and took one hesitant step back. Hannibal was consuming the room again, his presence swelled far larger than his little home in the sticks could handle. A confusing shot of fear and arousal kickstarted his steady heartbeat into high gear.

His hindbrain screamed 'predator' but Hannibal was no beast. At the moment he seemed closer to the stunning visage of the devil himself, whispering sweet promises into Will's ear.

"You manipulated me. You facilitated altered morality under the guise of understanding. Were whispered words your only method? You seem like you'd desire more control."

"You already have the answers to your questions, dear boy. Connections you fear to make weigh down that beautiful insight of yours. Tell me, what has slipped through your mind in your pursuits of normalcy?"

That was as close to a confirmation as he was going to get.

"After Garrett Jacob Hobbs, you wanted to watch me kill again. You knew what it would do to me, especially if I killed protecting you and the daughter you gave me. Was Gideon ever a real danger to you? Or did you just want me to believe he was in order to force my hand. I shouldn't have panicked, if he was truly a threat, you would have killed him like you killed Budge."

Hannibal's lips only pitched upward a fraction of an inch, but Will saw the wide, Cheshire smile that reached from ear-to-ear.

"The only part I don't understand was how you convinced Gideon to go with you? He hated psychiatrists, he wouldn't have hesitated as long as he did without reason."

"Was he without reason?"

There was only one person who could've stilled Gideon's hand or inspired him into action. Will already had his answer, he'd had it for a while, but it was still hard to accept.

How long had he known and purposely pulled the wool over his own eyes? Did he really need Gideon to have spelled it out for him? His intuition was rarely wrong and he'd been so confident that the Ripper had marked him. Had he ever truly stopped believing it?

"No, he wasn't."

The Chesapeake Ripper stalked forward one purposeful step at a time. Will backed away in tandem, matching his rhythm like a dance.

"Why are you hesitating now, Will? Where is all that righteous fury now that you've allowed your thoughts out of their steel trap? Or are you no longer able to conjure fury when facing the reality you cannot deny that you desire."

His back hit the sink, Hannibal stepped closer again. Will's heart was thumping like a jackrabbit and his fingers clenched around the porcelain — though he wasn't sure if they were anticipating a thrown punch or a searing embrace.

"There's no righteousness in senseless acts of violence. Killing without a purpose is destructive, evil."

"Destruction is not evil; earthquakes, hurricanes, and plagues have no agenda. In the billions of years since our planet's conception, humanity has been the only being to employ the concepts of justice and morality. Every other act of violence has come down to simple desire."

One of his hands fell heavy on the back of Will's head, forcing eye contact. Not that he could look away, even if he wanted to.

"The desire to eat."

Hannibal enunciated each word like a punishment, conjuring images of the meals he made, the meals Will adored. His eyes widened in the realization of what exactly Hannibal had been feeding him since the second time they spoke.

"The desire to protect."

Will recalled the all-encompassing rage he felt, the offense and fear that permeated his bones, the utter satisfaction when Gideon laid dying at his feet.

"The desire to *burn.* "

He was scorching. The painful, hot confusion of his encephalitis was a cool stream in comparison to the blazing heat of the depravity Hannibal wanted him to sink into. He could see the bald fervor in Hannibal's eyes — he would raze the world to ash, but he wanted nothing more than for Will to join him.

"My wildfire, you are not evil, but you crave destruction. The sacrifices you take are simply kindling to fuel your radiance, I shall not allow the pyre you've built to virtue be snuffed out under lesser hands."

Boiling blood erupted behind his eyes, tantalizing promises that he wanted so desperately to take without fear of consequence.

“Do you want to guide me? Influence me to be your protege?”

“You do not need guidance, I want you to be my equal, my muse. You’d never shine under subservience and I could never presume to direct your wrath, as one cannot predict the twirling path of a tornado.”

“I can’t just abandon decency, Hannibal. A whirlwind bloodbath is a fantasy that would only end in tragedy.”

“What has conforming to decency brought you? An empty home and stale friendships. I can still see the withered beast you were when I met you in the rooms of my memory palace. I fed him with flesh and you fed him with blood, nurtured him until he was strong enough to withstand the eyes that haunt you. Will he be sated with quiet days and routine nights? Look into yourself, can you even recall what life was like having not felt the rendering of skin and tissue under your hungry blade?”

His voice was pitched low and intimate, punishing against the inside of his skull. They stung, not like bee stings, but like the unfeeling of an acupuncturist’s needle. Will wound his arms around Hannibal’s hips without thinking — his body wanted to acquiesce though his mind resisted.

“I can still recall,” His words devolved into whispers as he drew Hannibal closer, breathing in his carbon dioxide. ”It felt like I was the limp felt of a puppet, filled to the brim and pushed around by the minds pressing into me. Each day blended into monotony, like I was staring at the wall of a solitary chamber deep in the bowels of the BSHCI.”

“And now?” Their lips brushed around ‘g’s and ‘w’s, warmth transferred in miniscule crashes.

“Terrifyingly whole, right on the verge of stable. I’m more myself than I've ever been and that self wants to cast humanity to the side in pursuit of maroon depravity.”

“I will not instruct you, but I will protect you to the depths of my ability. You will never see the inside of penitentiary walls, not while I still walk this earth.”

Will closed the narrow gap between them, sealing himself inside the sweet seduction of the devil’s promises.

Hannibal pulled back after a closed mouth press, nowhere near satisfying. “Do you trust me, Will?”

Will let out an exhale that was half a laugh and half a sob. “After everything, how can I? You’re still planning on hurting me tonight, this little confrontation wasn’t what you had planned.”

Another closed mouth press of his lips soothed him far too sweetly. “Yet you can’t help but feel my sincerity, not when you see me for all that I am.”

“Not all of you, but more facets than you’ve shown anyone else.”

“May you never reach the bottom, I couldn’t bear the thought of boring you.”

“You couldn’t, I feel like you took me not finding you that interesting as a personal challenge.”

That drew out Hannibal’s deep chuckle, Will felt it through his chest and against his lips. They melded together languidly, tongues darting out but not ramping up into something more desperate, simply enjoying the warm, slick pressure.

Will barely heard the words as they escaped his own lips. “How much will it hurt?”

“Enough that you may feel the need to make me your next sacrifice.” Will shivered as Hannibal dragged his lips to the shell of his ear. “I only ask that you kill me calmly, darling.”

A combination of the firm press of Hannibal’s body and the cloying, intimate violence he whispered caused him to have to readjust the tailored slacks. The thought of killing Hannibal caused his stomach to drop in nausea but simultaneously sent a wicked thrill through him — the opportunity to tear through him, see every minute detail of him in harsh clarity was one that was too enchanting not to imagine.

The brush of their lips became more heated, more frantic. Will ached to taste the other man’s blood, he wasn’t yet sated from all that he spilled the night before.

When Hannibal pulled away, a drawn out whine erupted from his chest. He chased his lips with a singular focus until Hannibal had to take a full two steps back.

His eyes were a blazing, torrid red underneath a comforting deep brown, full of fiery longing, yet he still had the wherewithal to retreat. “I’m afraid we’ll miss the performance if we idle here much longer.”

If only that iron control faltered just a little more, Will might be able to persuade him away from his schemes and back to his bed. He didn't let his trepidation show as he followed Hannibal out the door.

——

He’d anticipated a bloodbath, but to be honest, the most painful part of the evening so far was being trotted around Hannibal’s high society friends like a prized show pony. There was an endless menagerie of Dr. Somethings and Mr. and Mrs. Whatevers; Will made a conscious effort to not store the names of the whole disorder of shallow people into his eidetic memory.

There was a distracting pleasure though at being attached to Hannibal throughout the evening. They were a set: close in height, complimentary suits, constantly in casual contact. Will saw a few side eyes thrown his way from acquaintances that claimed they knew Hannibal far longer than he had, which was almost as hilarious as it was satisfying.

None of these people actually knew Hannibal; Will wanted to laugh in their faces and tear out their throats for insinuating that they did.

Hannibal was gracious enough to do the majority of the talking, seemingly more than pleased just by Will's continued presence on his arm. He snatched passing champagne flutes and downed them steadily as the concertos and intermissions continued on without incident.

The entire experience was so…normal. Mundane even. Will felt as if he'd stumbled into a fever dream on the arm of the Chesapeake Ripper, but he already knew what fever dreams were like. This was reality, strange as it was, and he really was just watching the symphony, being toted around the room, with one of the most dangerous men alive. He'd say it felt surreal, but his life felt like it had been tinged with unreality since the moment Hannibal had appeared in his life, so this was almost par for the course.

The longer the night drew on, the less convinced Will started to become that there would be an incident all together. Hannibal was clearly drawn in by the chamber music, his head lightly bobbed and swayed with the swelling melodies, lost to the world and nearly Will as well as he immersed himself in the emotion of the pieces.

It was remarkable to watch, Will leeched off his naked emotions with unabashed hunger and eventually he felt little wet pin pricks around his eyes. They were mirrored on Hannibal's face, the last time he'd seen him so close to tears was when he lost himself tying back Abigail's hair.

As soon as the lights went on, his face abruptly dried, whatever spell he was under evaporated as he re-donned his flawless person suit.

For the final time that evening, Hannibal subjected them to the simpering small talk of the well-dressed socialites. The only instances that made the whole affair bearable were Hannibal's politely cutting remarks that went clear over their recipients' heads. On more than one occasion, Will was rudely asked what he was smiling about after another of Hannibal's petty jabs.

If meeting a bunch of wealthy, self-gratifying airheads was all that Hannibal meant when he talked about pain, Will really was going to kill him. Anxiety mounted and ebbed intermittently as their outing drew to a close. Hannibal didn't wander from his side and made no indication that he had any interest in doing anything else tonight besides taking Will home.

"If you seriously got me so worked up over nothing…"

"I never promised any excitement at the symphony itself, unless of course you count the music, which I certainly do."

Will was about to demand to know when exactly the 'excitement' was supposed to start when his phone finally powered back on. It had been turned off for the performance and now he saw ten missed calls from Jack, one from Alana, and a whole slew of text messages — also mostly from Jack.

He snapped his gaze to Hannibal who was stoically keeping his focus on the road.

“What did you do?”

“You’ve been with me the last 24 hours, Will, you know what I’ve been up to.”

Realization hit him like a speeding truck. “I’m your alibi.”

“And I’m yours, fortunate that we have been seen in public, I’d say. The testimonies of soulmates are often taken with a grain of mistrust.”

“What will the both of us need alibis for?”

“I’m sure Jack is anxious to tell you.”

Hannibal’s tone was cruel and unsympathetic. This heartlessness was not a new facet of him, but one that Will had never seen turned towards himself. While he knew there was a fully formed man underneath the mantle of the Chesapeake Ripper, he now also saw the Ripper inside Hannibal. It was a jagged thing, a sharp dark spire that crawled high into the clouds, made of polished obsidian — a black so bright it couldn’t be ignored.

Has this always festered inside him? Was cruelty the true base nature of the man he’d committed to?

One of Hannibal’s hands fell onto his knee, Will read in his eyes what he was reluctant to say.

I’m sorry I have to hurt you once again, my dear, but it is not in a monster’s nature to be kind. Perhaps soon, when I have stolen enough of your humanity for you to see your own monstrosity, I will be human enough to be soft to you.

Despite what he knew was coming — a death certainly, one that apparently had the FBI scrambling — he still wanted to trust him.

Hannibal didn’t remove his hand as he called Jack. He picked up on the first ring.

“Will! Where have you been? I needed you an hour ago!”

A few months ago, he might’ve cowed down to Jack’s tone, internalized it like a scolded child, but his bones were coated in reinforced steel now, so without thinking his own voice hardened.

“Busy, what’s going on?”

“You better be able to prove ‘busy,’ because this isn’t looking good for you. I need you down at Druid Lake now, and for you to tell me where Abigail Hobbs is.”

He sucked in a barely cut off gasp. Druid Lake was just off Druid Park, the spot where he placed his hypothetical Ripper kill. The kill he described *to the Ripper.* This was no coincidence.

“I was at the symphony with Hannibal, we just got out. Abigail’s not at home?” He was asking Hannibal as much as Jack.

“Good, bring him too. No one responded when they went to Chandler St. — her car is still in the driveway.”

“What am I going to find at Druid Lake?”

He could almost hear Jack’s teeth grinding. “Freddie Lounds.”

Will’s racing thoughts ground to a halt. “We’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Make it ten.” He hung up before Will could give a token protest.

A beat of silence passed as Will took in the information, he noticed that Hannibal had failed to take the turn off to Chandler St. before he even dialed Jack’s number.

“You knew about this.”

“I did.”

“Did you kill her?”

“How could I? I’ve been with you, Will.” He hated how self-satisfied he sounded.

“Where’s Abigail?” Hannibal didn’t respond, he kept his gaze resolutely forward. “Tell me!”

“I would…prefer if I didn’t have to lie to you more than I must.”

“So you do know where she is?”

“I do.”

“And you won’t tell me?”

“No.” His thumb caressed the knobby bone of Will’s knee, unwillingly it still comforted him. Will wanted to shatter the digit, bend it backwards until it snapped.

“You helped her do this, I don’t know how you did, but she didn’t do this alone. She probably didn’t kill any of them alone. You said we had to protect her, but you put her in the path of Jack’s scrutiny. Everyone knows that Freddie’s been hounding us, she won’t be able to get around this one!” He scrambled for his phone again, pulling up Abigail’s number. He had to tell her to leave, wherever she was she had to stay far away from the FBI’s reach.

Her phone didn’t even ring, it went straight to a voicemail box that hadn’t even been set up.

“I helped her learn how to protect herself. She has grown far past the scared little girl you orphaned in Minnesota.”

“ *We* orphaned! You called the house, you provoked Hobbs into action. All the strength in the world isn’t going to help her when your manipulations land her a life sentence.”

“I have no intention of seeing her behind bars, you would do well to remember that.”

Will was seething, he wanted to scream, grab the steering wheel and crash the car into the nearest building. He wanted to tear Hannibal apart with his fists and teeth, but all he did was snatch Hannibal’s hand and crush it in his grip.

To the man’s credit, he didn’t even flinch. He just drove them through the rare tense silence until the flashing of red and blue lights on cop cars announced their destination. Will wished he thought to bring a change of clothes, he only realized now that he was still wearing the tux.

Beverly was the first to meet him at the scene, though he could see Jack marching over.

“I know you weren’t a fan of Lounds but don’t you think it's a little much to dress up for a crime scene?” She teased. Her joviality was infectious, on any other night Will might’ve said something snarky back, but he was still tense as a pulled bowstring.

“Didn’t have time to change. What are we looking at?”

“A runner found her at the edge of the lake, she hasn’t been dead long. Only about three hours I’d say.” They’d been at the symphony at least four hours, Will couldn’t have planned it better if he tried, which probably meant that it went exactly as Hannibal planned.

“Cause of death?”

“Mutilation, though you wouldn’t be able to tell by looking at her.”

“What’s the running theory?”

“Jack’s been holding off anything official until you arrived, but the consensus is the Ripper. It’s textbook, organs were removed — though the wounds suggest a hunting knife, not a scalpel — and even I can recognize the inspiration on this one.”

“Inspiration?”

“Ophelia, by Millais — don’t tell Zeller I had to look up the artist — you know the one where she’s lying in the river? Personally, I don’t think Lounds makes the best Ophelia, she wasn’t mad, just annoying.”

“Ophelia was driven mad by her visions, she was an oracle, but no one took her seriously. Some might say the same was true for Lounds.”

“She claimed that you two and the girl you adopted were killers. Are you saying we should have been taking her seriously?”

“No, just that I see the comparison.”

Jack announced his presence with a firm “Will, I want you looking at the body now.” He gestured towards the reeds at the bank of the lake where a heavy cluster of techs were

standing in a wide semi-circle. “Dr. Lecter, I’d like you to come with me. I have a few questions I’d like you to answer.” Will didn’t watch to see if he followed.

The local cops cleared out as they saw him approach, Price and Zeller were already standing back and away from the body, arguing over whether or not the surrounding reeds were ‘real’ cattails.

He could see the likeness to the painting Bev mentioned, it was a fairly well known work and the resemblance was uncanny. Lounds was placed delicately on the surface of the lake, her hair was splayed around her head as it shifted slightly with the movement of the water. The dress she wore was a muted color — long and flowing, the polar opposite to anything she would’ve worn in life. Her face was less severe when devoid of makeup, though her lips were still that signature shade of red.

At first glance, this looked like a classic Ripper. The posing, symbolism, and overall artistry seemed almost textbook to invoke the Ripper — *Hannibal* .

Will glanced behind him to where Hannibal was still talking to Jack. He looked over, almost as if he could sense Will’s gaze.

He smiled, it wasn’t menacing, it was *proud.*

If Will looked any longer, the corners of his lips would turn up reciprocally. He turned his attention back towards Lounds, the dark red of her lips still bothered him, it didn’t fit with the rest of the composition.

God, he wished he wasn’t wearing a suit right now, he could feel his dress shoes sinking into the mud.

He bummed a flashlight off one of the cleaners and turned the beam towards the slight gap between her lips.

Freddie Lounds had a small mouth, it shouldn’t be this…cavernous. Another catch of the light and he could see the same red of her lips on her teeth.

It was blood, definitely Lounds’ own blood considering her tongue was removed. He couldn’t tell without removing her from the lake, but he bet her lungs were gone too. Any cuts they found would likely be precise, not surgical though, but good enough to fool the majority of the agents.

Every new detail that screamed *Ripper, Ripper, Ripper* only had Will further convinced that this was not Hannibal’s hand. Aside from the obvious fact that the man couldn’t be in two places at once, was that it was almost too spot-on. The piece chosen wasn’t obscure enough, the message if the mad oracle was too precise. There wasn’t haughtiness or whimsy, this was pure derision painted by an artist given the Ripper’s guidance, though not explicit command.

This was Abigail’s debut as the Ripper’s apprentice. Her other two victims were practice — scratch paper. No wonder Hannibal was so damn proud.

Maybe the other investigators wouldn't see her in the design, but they'd still see her as a suspect considering who the victim was. It wouldn't be enough for her to come across as innocent, he didn't know how he was supposed to protect her, if he even could.

Everyone here expected him to do his job, to point them towards a killer he had sworn to parent.

A hand fell between his shoulder blades. There was only one person who'd interrupt him after Jack's specific orders.

"What do you see, Will?"

"A near-perfect recreation."

"Near? What is she lacking?"

"Experience."

"What of the recreation? There are some noticeable differences to Millias' Ophelia."

"Not enough that anyone else would see it."

"You're the only interpreter in their employ that could see a forgery."

"It won't be enough, the Ripper claiming this piece won't save her." Will pitched his voice below prying ears, but Hannibal's careful senses would still pick it up.

"You see the Ripper, don't you? He worked so hard to paint you this picture, it would be rude to point away, you know he hates wrongful attributions."

"Where is she?" He lowly demanded.

"We've already been here, Will. You know your role." Hannibal squeezed his shoulder once and retreated, leaving Will to the corpse.

Her hair and ribboned dress bobbed with the gently moving water, but her body stayed firmly in place, like it had roots growing from her back, planting her like the surrounding reeds.

He called over a few of the scene technicians. "See if you can lift her out, something's holding her up." They tried to be delicate, but whatever was keeping her in place was lodged deeply in the silt.

"See anything?" Jack joined him at the water's edge while they watched the techs struggle.

"Yeah, though I don't think it'll be all that helpful."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Jack could sniff out lies from a suspect like a bloodhound, the only way Will would be able to slip anything by him was to veil it in as much truth as he could.

“You already know this is the Ripper’s work. Everything’s present: the display, the humiliation, the sadism- her tongue’s missing. He pulled it out when she was alive.”

“Lounds was useful to him, why would he come for her now?”

“She’s been giving the credit of his murders to someone else. He’s too vain to allow it to go unpunished.”

“She claimed those were your murders, yours and Abigail Hobbs’. This doesn’t look great for you, Will.”

“You think I don’t know that? Everyone here thinks I’m either crazy or I’m faking being crazy, I can’t spend an evening with my family without being harassed, and I still don’t know where Abigail even is! She’s not a killer, that much I know. This was obviously the work of the Ripper and he’s been killing since she was in elementary school.”

They finally fished the body from its watery anchor. The first thing obviously noticeable were the long, off-white, branching tines embedded into Lounds’ back. The other end of the set was caked in mud where they had been planted in the lake bed. Great, formerly-pristine antlers had held her aloft, perfectly perched to give the allusion of a floating body.

“She may not be the Chesapeake Ripper, but she certainly has connections to him.” Will felt bile crawl up the back of his throat, he wondered if it would come out black or red. “You’re sure you don’t know where she is?”

“No, Jack!” He knew his voice was tinted with hysteria, but the blind panic overtaking his system leaked from him like an old faucet. “I haven’t been to Baltimore in a week, Hannibal was the last one who saw her, but that was before he came over yesterday. I’m sure he told you the exact same thing.”

Jack’s responding grimace confirmed as much.

“Any hits on her car?” Will asked, though he knew it wasn’t likely. Hannibal wouldn’t leave any loose ends.

“It’s still in Dr. Lecter’s garage. They’re going through the street cams now to see if anyone else was there.”

No one took her, if he didn’t know the Ripper’s identity he’d have a real fear that Abigail would turn up as the next painted lady.

“I need to know if she ran off or was taken. Dr. Lecter said she wasn’t a flight risk, but I can’t trust him to be objective.”

“But you can trust me? Listen, I won’t know until we go over there and I can get a read, but she was happy living with us—him,” he corrected quickly, though Jack surely noticed. “She told me herself, she wouldn’t have jeopardized that.”

It wasn’t the answer Jack wanted, but it was better than outright denial.

The techs set the body on its side, the back of the flowing dress was low, revealing more than the punctures of the antlers. There were two mirrored cuts running up the length of her back. Instead of surgical sutures, they were sewn back together with thin strips of leather, the same fashion that Garrett Jacob Hobbs used for shoelaces and binding pillows.

“He took her lungs too, broke the ribs and cut them out the back. Didn’t want to ruin the display.”

“Why not sutures?”

“Same reason he used antlers — though they would be more awkward to handle than some pvc pipe or metal rods — Abigail’s involved.”

“You just said that she didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“I said that she didn’t run off. She didn’t commit this crime, but that doesn’t mean the murder wasn’t committed *for* her. Last week she was harassed in public because of the articles Lounds was publishing, this could be the Ripper’s form of justice.”

“The Ripper doesn’t do vigilantism, he kills selfishly, for pleasure. Are you saying he’s suddenly changed motives?” Will was having a hard time keeping straight what he should and shouldn’t say. He couldn’t keep Abigail’s involvement entirely out of this scene, Hannibal didn’t seem to want him to, but he wasn’t sure how much he was supposed to imply. Anxiety and confusion swirled around him in a thick dark cloud, an entity he wished was tangible so he could carve it to pieces.

“No, I don’t know. I’m not even sure if this is the start of a sounder. He sees his victims as pigs, typically, but he *hated* Lounds, all I sense here is anger. No amusement, no self-gratification, just pure derision. It's not like him.”

“Well maybe if he’s mad, he’ll slip-” Jack’s phone rang, he pressed it to his ear without checking the caller ID. Maybe results from the street cams were in.

“Crawford, this better be important.” His face slackened into soft worry as soon as the voice on the other end of the line spoke. One person alone would bring that gentle expression to Jack’s face, especially when he was in front of a Ripper scene. ”Bella? Bella slow down, what's going on? What happened?”

Will couldn’t hear what she was saying on the other end of the line, but Jack’s face gradually fell into something more and more terrified.

“We’ll be there soon, just go back inside and lock the door. I love you.” In less than a minute, Jack had rounded up a small armored squad and led the charge away from Lounds’ corpse.

“Jack? What’s going on?” Will trailed after him as he gave frantic, stern orders left and right.

“I’ll explain on the way, bring Dr. Lecter too.” His voice raised in pitch to be heard over the bustle. “Zeller, Price, Katz! Finish here quickly then follow, I’ll text you the address.” Price gave a full-on salute while the other agents swiftly went back to prodding and swabbing.

He piled into Jack's cruiser, Hannibal trailed just behind with a parting grimace that set Will's teeth on edge.

"What happened? Is Bella alright?"

"For the moment. Apparently someone left a 'gift' on our doorstep. She said it was a 'bucket of blood with a weird sculpture in it', but she didn't stay long enough to tell me much more. She hadn't heard anybody outside, she was leaving for her evening walk."

"The timings a bit suspect."

"You think?" Will felt the cruiser kick into a higher gear as Jack leadened his foot on the gas pedal.

"If it's the Ripper, Bella's not in any danger. He already made his point." What the point was, Will didn't know. Lounds showed signs of blood loss, though she wasn't bled, but he had a sinking feeling he might know who's blood they might find instead.

"I'm not taking any chances." His fists tightened on the wheel. Will didn't need to empathize to know exactly what Jack was feeling. He'd been in a very similar situation not too long ago.

Jack lived in the country, away from the prying eyes and sticky fingers of the city. There were few break-ins and fewer cameras, whatever Bella Crawford found on her doorstep was likely placed without a single witness.

Despite his salary accommodating for something far more extravagant, the house Jack shared with his wife was modest — classy, but modest. In another life, this house could have easily harbored a couple excitable children.

The container was easily visible from the road, but they'd need to get closer to see what was actually inside, though Will could make out a shape that seemed vaguely humanoid. It was less of a bucket and more of a trough, as he approached he could get more of a sense of the sculpture.

There were more antlers, it seemed everywhere he looked there were just more antlers. He almost expected a pair to sprout out of his own head. In fact, now that he got a closer look, it seemed the whole sculpture was made of antlers.

They were woven together and broke to fit, creating the image of a small person with their legs tucked close to their chest — an upright fetal position. The figure's head consisted of a full stag skull, the rack unbroken and impressive in its size. It sat slightly askew, as if the figure was cocking its head.

It sat in a shallow red bath, thick with the coppery scent — blood stained the off-white bone. White flower petals floated on top of the fluid and were interspersed throughout the structure.

Will peered closer, it was hard to see from a casual glance, but there were organs hidden inside the sculpture. What drew his attention initially were the intestines — both large and small — that could be seen through the bones. There was also a heart placed inside the ‘ribcage’ and a tongue fastened to the underside of the skull. They were all at different stages of preservation, the tongue obviously being the freshest. There was no question where it originated from.

Will had a pretty good guess where the other organs came from too, but he had a bad feeling about the blood. There wasn’t so much that it had to come from multiple people, but if it was from one person, there’s no way they would still be alive. The organs were an afterthought, the gilded frame to the finished portrait, but the blood was central, important. There was only one donor that would make this piece whole.

“What am I looking at, Will? Is this a threat?”

“It’s a monument,” he spat out, he’d never hoped he was wrong so much in his entire life.

“To who?”

“Abigail Hobbs. There’s four victims here, the heart and intestines belonged to the two missing doctors and you already know who’s tongue that is. The blood, its…” His throat suddenly closed as he saw Hannibal approach. He knew Hannibal could see him begging, *pleading,* that he was wrong.

A sob wrenched from his throat when he saw an apology on Hannibal’s face.

He didn’t have any words. What could he even say to the man who gave him then killed his daughter?

Will’s fist connected with Hannibal’s left eye and clipped his nose. He’d thrown as much weight into the punch as he could, he felt a small crunch under his knuckles. Hannibal hadn’t even tried to dodge.

“Will!? What the-” He interrupted Jack before he could finish.

“I’m calling a cab. Don’t contact me.” He directed his statement towards both men present, but his outrage and despair were for Hannibal alone. Tears welled up in his eyes as he marched away. Jack’s commands of ‘Will! Come back here!’ fell deafly on his ears until he was far enough away that they faded into the night.

Chapter End Notes

i'll give u a treat if u find the hidden naruto reference lmao

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was surprised he held it together long enough to make it home. The cab driver was either discrete or apathetic enough to not ask why hot streaks of tears were dripping steadily into his passenger's lap. It wasn't until he arrived in his lonely little home that the shaking overtook his composure.

He buried his face in Winston's ruff and allowed mouthfuls of fur to stifle the pained noises he was making.

Christ, how long had he truly known Hannibal was dangerous? How long had he known what the man was capable of and left himself in purposeful blindness? Why did he never believe Hannibal's potent cruelty would turn inward? He'd been so caught up in his fantasy, the heady power that came from expressing his darkness and returning to open arms and a full home, that he somehow forgot his years of police work and academy training.

Killers always escalated. They hurt the people close to them, even the ones they claimed to love. Hannibal — the Chesapeake Ripper — was one of, if not the most, violent killers he'd ever encountered. He had a sadistic streak a mile wide and a kill count that could conceivably reach into the triple digits. Will should have expected this. As soon as he walked into the room and saw Budge's cooling corpse he should have run screaming for the hills. Instead, he'd believed the saccharine words that flew from his lips without question.

Eventually, he peeled himself away from the only loyal companion he'd had and flung the front door open. Even deep in his despair, he wouldn't punish his dogs. Winston didn't move to follow the pack as they left to empty their bladders and exercise their jittery instincts. He followed like a concerned parent as Will stumbled into his kitchen.

There was a sealed bottle of Hannibal's scotch that Will debated smashing on the floor. Instead he ignored it and picked up a half-full bottle of cheap whiskey that he knew would be empty before he fell asleep. He grabbed a second unopened bottle of the same low-shelf dreck and retreated to his living room.

It was only when he collapsed in his good armchair and felt the pull of fabric along his back, did he remember he was still wearing the god damned suit. He tore it off like every article was an open flame plastered to his skin. He flung them into his fireplace without thinking, but it had long since been smothered. The only consolation was the pale gray ash he could see staining the pristine blues.

He drank until the bottle was empty and then started on the next. Poison pulled him into unconsciousness before his eyes could dry.

———

His head pounded, it felt like there was a tiny man inside his skull, trying to drill his way out. Wryly, he thought this must've been why ancient people willingly bored holes into their own heads.

At some point in the night, he must've moved himself to his bed, but he was still dressed only in his boxers and socks. He felt Winston's sleeping form along his bare, uncovered back. Gooseflesh peppered his skin as cold air was still seeping from his wide-open front door.

He finally realized what awoke him, his phone was rattling against the grate of his fireplace from inside his suit pocket. A couple of the dogs had gotten up to investigate the noise.

Will wasn't going to answer. There was no one he wanted to speak to at the moment. Eventually, the buzzing stopped and he buried his head back into his worn-down pillow, lumpy in all the wrong spots. The buzzing started up again almost immediately.

Eventually they would stop calling, he just had to keep ignoring them. After his phone had returned to resigned silence and it didn't start up again right away, he figured he was out of the woods.

Of course, it wasn't that easy. His landline rang through his home like a siren. He covered his ears with his pillow to attempt to stifle it, but it didn't do much. He vowed to wait this one out too, but the voicemail pounded Jack's stern tone against his ears.

"Will, if you don't pick up the phone, I'm coming over, and I know you don't want that. I know you need time to…process but this is important. Pick up your damn phone!"

The next time his landline rang he grabbed it on the last tone. "I told you not to contact me."

"You were right about the blood, we gathered that there were about four liters, all Abigail Hobbs. Will…"

"I know," His hand shook at his side, whether from rage or grief, he wasn't sure. "When's the funeral?" He was surprised that his voice didn't crack.

"What?"

"She's dead, Jack. The Chesapeake Ripper killed the girl I'd only begun to see as a daughter. I want to know when her funeral is."

"We're still analyzing-"

"I don't care! Here, I'll finish your investigation here for you — the Chesapeake Ripper killed all those people, he's always been the one behind it. Freddie Lounds accredited his work to Abigail, so he killed her, then he killed Abigail for the crime of being his unwilling substitute. Now, tell me when her funeral is." He wasn't sure why he was protecting Hannibal even now, he should just come right out and say it — there'd certainly be enough evidence in his pantry. Hell, there might even be evidence in Will's own freezer.

"There's still evidence-"

“No, there isn’t! There never is and there won't be this time! I’m done, Jack. I can’t do this anymore. Don’t call me unless you’re going to tell me when her funeral is.”

“You’re not going to try to catch him? You’re not going to give justice to Abigail Hobbs?”

“That’s rich coming from you. But no, there’s no justice to give, she’s already dead. I’m going to mourn her, and then I’m going to leave Quantico and move to who knows where. Call me when you’ve scheduled the wake, otherwise I’ll just hang up.”

“Will wait, you can’t just leave. What about Hannibal?”

“As far as I’m concerned, he’s just as responsible for her death as the Ripper. If you come here, I’ll get out my shotgun.” He ended the call by slamming the phone back into the cradle. There were tiny cracks in the plastic that he hadn’t noticed he was creating.

—

Two days after Jack’s call, Will awoke to a pounding at his front door. His head didn't hurt, but that was probably because he was still drunk. The cheap bottle of gin he dug out from the back of his cupboards had toppled in the night, leaving his mattress and carpet stinking of booze. He barely noticed as he stumbled from his bed.

He debated grabbing his shotgun, which was left leaning next to the door, but honestly he didn't have the energy, and he didn't actually want to use it. If Hannibal was on the other side though, he just might.

Hannibal wasn't there, he hadn't tried to call or leave any messages for Will either. Alana stood on his porch, as beautiful and put together as ever — only emphasizing the lack of hygiene Will had fallen into.

"Will," she smiled gently. She couldn't disguise the pity in her eyes, but they were also red-rimmed, she'd been crying. He could excuse the pity this once, what else was she supposed to feel for a man who lost his daughter? "I figured you could use some company."

"You figured?" She flinched at his harsh tone. The booze was starting to wear off and a headache was beginning to replace the brain fog. It would only get worse if he started crying again.

"It's not healthy to deal with this alone. You're refusing Jack's calls, which I can't really blame you for, but you're also avoiding Hannibal. He's feeling the same emotions you are, he's your *soulmate,* Will. I just don't understand what's going on."

Whatever leniency he was willing to give Alana vanished in an instant. "If you don't understand, then you shouldn't interfere. Did Hannibal put you up to this?" Maybe he *should* reach for his shotgun.

"He didn't, in fact he told me not to come at all, but this isn't good for either of you. If you're refusing his support, you could at least accept mine, you're not the only one who had a bond with her."

Will almost wanted to laugh at Alana's open earnestness. She had no idea what she was talking about, the betrayal and blood that Will was trying to drown in liquor.

"I'm tired, Alana. I don't want support, I want time to mourn. I realize you're trying to help, but unless you can bring her back, I'm not interested."

She opened her mouth to protest, but apparently reconsidered as she took in the state Will was in. "Her funeral is in two days. They wanted to wait longer until forensics...finished, but Hannibal has been working around the clock to put together a service."

"He'll be giving the eulogy, right?" Bile began to crawl up Will's throat as he imagined the ceremony, having to sit there in the front row as he watched the man who killed her speak of the life he cut short. His hands shook, he knew they moved in rage and not grief right now.

"He will. So will I, no one else volunteered." Now isn't that sad? Abigail was orphaned and ripped from the few friendships she had by the impulsive, gruesome actions of the men that attempted, poorly, to care for her. Will didn't care what darkness she kept, how many bodies she left, what tastes she developed, she deserved better. Better than Will could give her, and certainly better than the sole cruelty her one legal guardian could offer. "Are you going to speak?"

"Got nothing to say. I wouldn't be able to keep it together."

Alana nodded, she probably expected that response.

Will retreated inside with a few placating, parting words. He didn't invite her in from the porch, and she seemed to understand that his waning social graces were all used up.

He sat in front of his unlit fireplace again, deciding not to take any aspirin for his burgeoning headache. The suit was in crumpled disarray, but still mostly whole — he didn't have the energy to burn it just yet.

His rage hadn't faded, Hannibal needed to pay. Will's morality had taken its share of blows, he barely cared about the murders and cannibalism compared to the cruelty and deception he put on the people he claimed to love.

Will had to kill him.

What other choice did he have? He wouldn't turn Hannibal in, he couldn't bear to see him waste away in a cell until that beautiful mind was nothing but tattered shreds. He also couldn't allow Hannibal to go on living as he had before, as if Will was a mere plaything to be used, abused, and discarded.

Currently, his rage was stymied by depressive apathy. He felt numb, weak. In no state to take on Hannibal's monster, but seeing Hannibal in front of a crowd, spouting meaningless words to people that couldn't begin to understand Abigail would fuel his anger enough to do what needed to be done.

He found his hand gun and loaded two bullets. If he missed his first shot, Hannibal would kill him, if he didn't, then the second bullet would be for himself. In two days, no matter the result, his life would come to an end.

The thought was oddly relaxing. It really only felt as if his life had begun a few months ago, before that he'd been floating on an empty, lonely current, falling below the surface at every turn. His long-held beliefs had stayed true in the end — good things never lasted in his life. He'd cut down the last beautiful piece but it could cut into him once again.

———

The next day passed quickly. He spent time with each of his dogs, most of their morning they spent at the stream. He didn't bring his poles, he just stood at the bank, tossing sticks and scaring the fish. He could still see Abigail standing at the center, jerkily casting her line while Hannibal watched with his back against a nearby tree.

Their memory was tainted. The stream began to cloud from crystal clear to a rusty red hue. Fever-induced hallucinations had ceased, but his imagination had always been overactive, he knew that if he tasted the water, he'd feel blood on his tongue.

The dogs bounded back and forth without a care. Will tried not to let his mind turn their wet paws red.

———

The room was filled with chairs — plastic but padded, fancy enough to have small armrests.

Less than half of them were filled.

Will didn't recognize the majority of the people in the room, but he did when they approached him, offering their names and 'sincere' condolences.

Other than Hannibal, Alana, and himself, the only attendees to Abigail's funeral were journalists. Even though they weren't as brash as Lounds was, they were just as smarmy in his eyes.

The small urn at the front of the room was dwarfed by bundles of flowers — large, tasteful bouquets in blues, greens, and violets. He could tell clearly which ones Hannibal brought, they were the vast majority that cradled the urn between delicate petals, and the cheap, plastic wrapped flowers brought by the journalists. Will almost wanted to ask them to take them back, but then what was left of Abigail would be solely surrounded by more of Hannibal's influence, and he'd already taken so much from her.

Will placed his own blue and white bouquet near Alana's, the only pop of yellow in the entire garden.

His seat was in the front row, second from the left, which was for Hannibal, according to the reserved card. Will's gun was tucked into the back of his suit pants, but instead he felt for his

hunting knife, folded in his front pocket. Not the dark blue suit, of course, that was still in the fireplace.

He wasn't sure if the knife was the cruel or cowardly option, but it felt right to bring it.

Hannibal worked his way through the room like he did at the orchestra's reception, only now with a more carefully somber expression painted on his mask. Will could tell he was avoiding him, but Will didn't attempt to close the distance. No, that would only happen after, when Will was boiling with enough righteous rage that his knife could find the man's heart or his bullet could find his temple.

At the moment though, he had to deal with the one bit of anger that wasn't directed towards Hannibal.

Alana was at Hannibal's side, so Will hadn't approached her, but the eulogies were set to begin in five minutes, and he had to speak to her before they started.

He didn't glance in Hannibal's direction when Will touched her arm. Hannibal murmured something to her and moved away before she could protest.

"I still don't understand why you're both doing this. If you just *told me—"*

"Where's Jack? There's five minutes until the ceremony starts, where the hell is he?"

"...what?"

"After all he put her through, the least he could do is show up to her funeral. Where. Is. He." Will was out of the mental capacity for patience or kindness. At least he wouldn't last long enough to see the repercussions.

"Wait, didn't he tell you?" Will had unplugged his landline and shut off his cell phone after he got confirmation about the funeral. If Jack made up some excuse not to be here, Will would kill him too.

"I don't want to hear whatever justification he gave you. He should be here."

"They found Miriam Lass."

"...the rest of her body?" Of *course* Hannibal couldn't give Will a chance to mourn. He had to keep piling corpses, proving his smug superiority wherever he saw fit.

"No, *her.* Alive. She walked right up Jack's driveway and knocked on his door. She was missing an arm, but the Ripper just let her go."

Alana was still talking, but Will's ears had begun to ring.

He took Lass's arm. Just enough of her to convince the FBI she was dead.

Hannibal was watching him, no doubt he heard what Alana said. The tiny quirk of his lips was apologetic, but not mournful. His eye was still bruised where Will punched him.

Will stomped over to him, tears of anger and relief hot in the corners of his eyes.

"You *son of a bitch."* His words were filled with so much spiteful venom that he noticed a small spray of spittle fly from his lips, though his urge to kill the man faded into dust and was swept away by swirling hopeful winds.

He clamped his hand around Hannibal's wrist and dragged him from the open hall. Alana blocked his path before he could make it to the door, though Hannibal offered no resistance.

"Will, what are you doing?!"

"Stay out of it."

"Will—"

"I'm serious. This doesn't involve you." He shouldered past her and made his way out the door. He knew the whole room was watching, there was no way the trained reporters were looking away, but he couldn't give a damn at the moment.

"Hannibal, please. You're speaking soon," she begged.

"We'll be back shortly, I promise," Hannibal attempted to placate her as Will let the doors swing behind them. She didn't follow at least.

There was a dark corridor just out of the way from the main room. He shoved Hannibal up against the nearest wall as soon as they were just out of sight.

"You lied to me, *again!*" Will whipped out his pocket knife and pressed it against Hannibal's throat, feeling his pulse through the blade. "All you do is lie, every word that passes your mouth is altered, the truth a concept so far off you couldn't find it if you searched your entire life. What do you have to take from me, what do I have to take from you before you start telling me *the fucking truth!*"

"Will—"

"Shut the hell up! Stop talking for once in your goddamned life. I'm going to tell you what's going to happen. You're going to go in there, you're going to give whatever bullshit speech you prepared, then you're going to take me to see her. Any objections?" He pressed the knife harder into Hannibal's neck, almost enough to draw blood.

"...no."

"Good. Now take off your pants and tie."

"Will, this is hardly the time—"

"Did I fucking stutter? Take them off. I'm not asking." Without breaking eye contact, Hannibal deftly undid the thick Windsor knot and shucked his pants down to his ankles. Will only moved the blade enough to allow the action. "I've let you off the hook too easily before, that's why you think you can keep getting away with this over and over. You won't learn your

lesson unless I force you to remember. I was too kind, too shallow with the last reminder. You need something that will stick."

Hannibal's eyes blazed in the dim light. He wasn't afraid, Will didn't think he felt fear from injury or death, but he wasn't feeling that delightedly anticipatory buzz he had when Will held a knife to him last. He was apprehensive now, as he should be.

"Hold still," Will withdrew the gun from the back of his pants and held it to Hannibal's temple as he moved the knife from his neck.

He plunged the knife into Hannibal's thigh swiftly, about two inches deep. Hannibal groaned, deep and pained, but still held to that rigid position Will was holding him at. Will yanked out the knife, twisting it as he did so, still making sure to avoid the major veins that would make him bleed out within the next few hours.

Hannibal didn't say a word, his expression flicked between pride and fury, a hint of betrayal.

"I didn't kill you. It's more than you deserve." Will wrapped the tie around his bare leg, tightening it like a makeshift tourniquet. "Don't bleed out during the service. I'll see you at home."

He left without looking back and without helping Hannibal pull his pants up. Abigail wasn't likely at Hannibal's home, but he'd look anyway.

Alana caught him just before he was able to drive away, her heels *tak-tak* ing in a quick staccato as she ran across the pavement.

"What did you do to him?!" Her hair had fallen into her face from its neatly styled position.

"Nothing that he didn't deserve."

"He was *limping,* Will! No matter how hard he tried to disguise it! I still don't understand what's going on, but you're bad for him! Christ, how could you do that to your soulmate?"

"I told you to stay out of it. If he's not objecting then neither should you." He slammed the door and drove off before she could get another word in, but Will could see her cursing in the rear view mirror.

Honestly, he didn't feel great about alienating Alana like he did. They had only just begun to repair their strained relationship, and this was the equivalent of him setting fire to the freshly budding seeds of reconciliation, but he knew that the relationship they had was temporary. He still was not going to stay at Quantico, not in Wolf Trap or Baltimore either.

She'd recover eventually, and being close to Will would only hurt her in the long run. This was for the best.

———

Hannibal arrived home about two hours after Will left him in the funeral home's hallway. The service must've been short, or Hannibal had found some way to rush it. The veins of his

temples were bulging and his jaw was visibly clenched. His gait was only interrupted by a slight limp that Will was surprised Alana even picked up on in the first place.

As far as Hannibal went, he was doing *bad.* The fact that he allowed the pain to physically affect him this much just went to show how much he was in. Giving the eulogy must've been excruciating, having to stand tall and solidly for that amount of time, and Hannibal was not known for being short-winded.

He didn't acknowledge Will trailing after him as he made his way to the bathroom, though he did pick up the sterilized and threaded stitching needle left on the sink.

"You're just going to ignore me?"

"I simply have nothing of merit to say."

"I haven't forgiven you."

"I'd be disappointed if you had." How many times had they been here? How many times would he sit back and watch as Hannibal put himself back together again?

His body was littered with scars, Will only knew the origin of a fraction of them. Could any be considered typical? Was the scar on his knee from a bad tumble in childhood or a desperate defense wound from one of his victim's nails? Was the small line on his stomach from a removed appendix or a man with a knife who attempted to slay a monster?

"How long have you been planning this? You couldn't have taken all that blood from her in one night."

"A few weeks. She was no longer safe here, I swore I would protect her."

"I took the same vow. You had so much time to tell me, so much time you left me to fester."

"I was allowing you to protect her as only you could. Had your response been less genuine, suspicion might have arisen towards her continued existence." The steady back and fourth of his hands had nearly become routine.

"I could have told Jack everything. What was there to hold me back?"

"You didn't, and I knew you wouldn't. You would not allow our ending to be so impersonal."

"How would you know?" He reached for Hannibal's face as the man sewed his thigh back together. His thumb pressed down on the yellow edge of the bruise near his temple. "I wasn't exactly thinking rationally, I'm still not if I'm being honest."

"Because you and I are just alike. Rational actions or not, you and I are tethered by more than the signifiers on our chests. How many bullets were in your gun, Will?" He left the wound half sewn up, blood and thread dangling down his bare thigh in order to cover Will's hand with his own, pressing further into the burst blood vessels.

"Two."

"One for each of us. You were not so eager to end our existence earlier that evening, despite knowing what I am."

"You should really finish sewing yourself up. You're probably already low on blood." Will pulled away to hover in the bathroom door again. "I don't care what you are, not anymore. I can't acknowledge my own thrill while admonishing yours, but you made me question whether there was enough humanity left in you that I could live with it."

"You decided you couldn't." He finished the sutures and wiped away the remaining blood that had trickled all the way past his knee.

"I can only bend so far. There's only so many times you can break and repair the teacup before the shards are too small to find."

"And now? Have I broken us beyond repair?" His careful neutrality could only hide so much, his reluctant desire for companionship warring with the protection solitude had brought him.

When Hannibal's family was taken from him as a child, when his sharp mind and strange curiosities kept others at bay, only his monster kept him safe and sane. Self-amusement and narcissistic gratification were his substitutes for love and connection. Will was only beginning to see how much of him that he'd been forced to alter in order to allow another person, a family, to take root in the barren earth he believed he was.

Will knew what he wanted, even if he was frightened to admit it to himself. Currently, Hannibal bore the burden of choice, between controlled, apathetic safety, and the connection he'd been denied and denied himself for decades.

Will would take that choice from him, as he'd taken so many from Will. Perhaps then Hannibal could accept his own becoming.

"Not yet, but you were pretty close. I don't want to go back to solitude. I don't want you to force me to choose it over a life with you, but I won't stay if betrayal is all you have to offer."

"Despite my actions, I still wish to know you, Will, to be known by you." He limped back to Will's side, his posture as soft and open as he would allow himself. Will stayed rigid, iron in comparison. "I wish for us to fit together again, find solace in another's presence. Is there anything I can do to prove my sincerity?"

"We can never go back to how we were before, but neither of us want that, we hadn't reached understanding. I have two conditions, and if you follow them without manipulation and without alteration, I'll consider staying." Will wasn't sure if he could go through with the threat, but he *was* sure that Hannibal would accept. His desire to influence Will, to stay in his company despite the protective solitude, would keep him near, at least, though likely not docile. Complacency was counter to the man's being, but Will would take the gamble that he might obey if Will was his master. "First, you'll do what I say, without question, second, you'll trail no further from my line of sight at all times."

"To what end?"

"Until I'm satisfied. Could be weeks, months, maybe years."

"Do you want me to be subservient? Do you wish to trim my nails and pull out my fangs?"

"No, but I want you to be loyal. Leashed if I must. If you want any of me, I'll have the entirety of you in return."

"You already have my mark, my blood, my identity. What else is there for me to give?"

"Your freedom." All casual motion ceased in an instant. Will watched as Hannibal's muscles tensed, his shoulders raised a fraction, his jaw clenched as his teeth ground together. The edges of him were always so hard to find, but Will found one he feared more than death.

A cruel smile made its home on Will's lips — he'd already read the acceptance in his eyes.

Will raised one brow cruelly and made to step away.

“...very well,” Hannibal didn't meet his gaze as he acquiesced, focused on bandaging the stitched up wound.

"Just like that? You're not going to try to negotiate?"

"I wasn't aware negotiation was on the table, you seemed fairly set in your design," Hannibal replied easily, though he was still far more tense than Will was used to seeing, but that could reasonably be attributed to the pain in his leg. Even he wasn't entirely unshakeable.

"It's not, and I am. Are you ready to go?" Will tapped his foot impatiently, anxious to reassure himself that Abigail was still alive and well. It wasn’t as if he was having doubts, he'd just already forced himself to accept the idea once, and his mind was having a difficult time letting the grief go. He didn't feel the need to take more of his frustrations out on Hannibal though, he'd already given his punishment, but Will was a realist. He preferred to have the physical evidence in front of him.

"Yes, though I'd like to change first. I'd rather not see our daughter wearing trousers with a prominent blood stain."

"You've probably, no *definitely,* shown her worse, but fine." He trailed after Hannibal as he made his way towards his bedroom, intent on keeping Hannibal to the 'never trail out of my sight' rule, even in this small a circumstance.

“Are you good to drive, or do you want to just give me directions?”

“I should be perfectly fit to drive.” His words were counter to his obvious struggle trying to change his pants. Will sat him down on the edge of the bed and batted his hands away. Will hadn't realized it at the time, but the wound he left in Hannibal's thigh almost perfectly covered the scar Budge left. Somehow that felt more right, Will *should* be the only one allowed to harm his monster.

“Don't be stubborn, I'll do it.”

Chapter End Notes

i hate being sick augh im like chugging nyquil rn loopy as SHIT

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

sup im not dead

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Bentley responded smoothly to every small touch. Will personally would never spend $100,000 on a car, but he could see the appeal. Maybe if he was ridiculously wealthy and had been since he was little, then maybe he'd think of buying a luxury car — it certainly would make his morning commute a little nicer — but honestly there was nothing wrong with his aging Buick. It got decent mileage and had enough room for his dogs, which was honestly all he needed.

He'd never be able to keep the leather seats clean anyway. He wondered if he'd be able to convince Hannibal to let him keep his own car when they left for good.

Hannibal had him merge onto the highway, the car purred under his feet.

"How attached are you to this beast?" Will tapped the wheel with his palm but didn't take his eyes off the road.

"As attached as I am to anything else I own. It serves its purpose."

"I want you to sell it," Will said mildly.

"Should I ask why?" He didn't sound opposed, only curious. "Is this another condition?"

"No, we just don't need three cars, and I don't want to get rid of mine."

"We're both adults, don't we require our own vehicles?"

"Not when I'm not letting you out of my sight." They wouldn't need their own homes either, now that Will thought about it, though he *had* already been planning on moving in with him. Though that problem would probably sort itself out when he made them leave Baltimore.

"Alright, consider it sold. I'll have someone pick it up as soon as we return."

Will nodded, Hannibal's answer not surprising him much.

"You're really serious about this, huh? Just letting me do what I want?"

"Why wouldn't I be? You've already given me all that I desire as well, and I still have the duty to earn your trust." Hannibal stated his words like they were simple truths, hard facts

that were already intrinsically known. If Will had any reservations about Hannibal's adherence to his rules, his conviction was certainly soothing his mind.

"You care about me finding you trustworthy that much? You already know that I won't turn you in." Perhaps his next words weren't the most intelligent to say if he still wanted to keep his advantage, but still Will allowed them past his tongue. "I'm sure you know that even if I said I would, I wouldn't actually leave."

"I still don't want your resentment, as much as my actions may say otherwise. First and foremost, I consider you a partner, Will. I've had affairs in the past, flings and relationships, but none that have felt equal." He didn't hesitate for a second before he placed his hand upon Will's knee — a comfortable position they seemed to always fall into when driving. "I've never considered anyone else a true partner."

"Because they weren't your soulmate?"

"Because they weren't you, my dear." Will didn't need to see an actual change of expression to know that Hannibal was smiling. "Soulmate or not, no other person would want to see the entirety of me as you do."

"Abel Gideon wanted to meet you, understand you. Tobias Budge did too, didn't he?"

"The Ripper is as much a mask as the person suit I wear. Neither the killer, nor the man Jack Crawford knows is the entirety of me. Only you, and perhaps one other person, has witnessed my entire being, a rare gift I've afforded you." Hannibal spoke softly, no sounds from the radio or any open windows could muffle his words though.

"And you know me in turn. Every crevice, every part I wished to hide from even myself. I never should have worried about it scaring you — you were intrigued from the start." He risked a glance at Hannibal and saw him staring, eyes softer than he usually allowed. "The other was Mischa, wasn't it? She saw you, however briefly."

"She did, though I was far from developed. You got a more complete version."

"Tell me what happened to her? What happened to you? You hinted before, but it was never the full picture, was it?"

"You weren't ready for the full picture."

"I am now that I see your entirety. I already said I wouldn't have any secrets between us."

"You did, I simply don't believe I've spoken of the incident fully since it occurred. My memory of the time is a bit hazy." There was a certain glaze beginning to cover his eyes, Will could tell the memory was already starting to take foot.

"We've got time, unless we're coming up on your hidey-hole already."

"No, we're still quite a ways off. About an hour or so along this highway."

Will hummed in acknowledgement and set the cruise control. He switched the wheel to grasp it in one hand and laid his other on top of Hannibal's, still resting on his knee.

He sighed deeply, though not reluctantly, simply bracing himself for the clear onslaught of emotion the memory would bring. Will knew from the little he spoke of that he was still deeply affected, though he never gave much indication that anything could pierce his seemingly-impenetrable person suit.

"I was eleven, my sister was only eight. She is the only aspect that's clear during my childhood memories, the rest is more amorphous, though I do remember that when I was a boy, our tutors would say I had a fair memory. I'm sure you were told the same thing."

Will nodded. Obviously they were too poor for tutors and they moved around too much, but his teachers always praised him for how well he did on tests and how quickly he picked up material, of course this was in between digs at his social tendencies and implications that he should be tested for one mental disorder or another.

"That was back during the wartime, Lithuania was hit hard — I won't go into specifics. A few enemy soldiers came upon my home, we were secluded and had a fair spot of land, so it was a welcome respite during the harsh winter, I suppose." His voice trailed into bland unaffectedness, as if he was reading facts off a notecard. "My parents were killed in the initial invasion. I guess it was too harsh, even for battle-trained soldiers to kill unarmed children."

Will made sure he didn't crush Hannibal's hand even though his grip on the wheel tightened. The blandness in Hannibal's voice wasn't choking down the pain in his current statement, he was holding something back that truly hurt him. Will could taste the stench of frightful anticipation in the air and knew something worse was coming.

"There was only so much food in the estate and all the servants fled or died in the initial attack as well. It was just us and the soldiers for months."

"You must have been frightened."

"I was, but I was strong for Mischa." He swallowed and flipped his hand in Will's grip, threading their fingers together. "I suppose you are familiar with the sensation of slowly starving, you implied that meals were often skipped in your childhood."

"Some weeks were harder than others, but I was never on the brink of real starvation. Just some light malnourishment." He squeezed Hannibal's palm and tried to force a smile to his lips to show he was joking, that this wasn't a trauma contest. Even if his smile wasn't returned, he could tell that Hannibal appreciated the effort.

"The winter dragged on and eventually the food ran out." His face slackened further, his hand going limp in Will's grip. Will simply clung on, giving Hannibal an anchor when he was able to return to himself. "We were getting desperate, but so were the soldiers." He blinked once, then twice more, trying to shake off an emotion that had been with him for over four decades. "You know, we always consider children to be so imaginative, lost in ideas that fester in their little minds, but experience breeds true creativity, and the soldiers were far more experienced than us." His hand trembled lightly.

“What did they do to you?” Will whispered, knowing that his tone wouldn’t be so lost if they simply left the children to starve.

“Separated us at first. That week had been particularly rough — a snowstorm had hit and they hadn’t even been able to hunt. By that time, our food stores had long since run dry, so all that was left was the snow outside. Mischa had fallen ill, starvation had crippled her immune system, and mine wasn’t much better by that point, but I did my best to keep her warm. They…they said they were going to get her some medicine. I’m not sure why I listened, why I didn’t follow. They had murdered our parents, I’m not sure why I trusted them with my sister.”

His grip on Will’s hand turned painful for a second before he forcibly relaxed. Will didn’t need his intuition to know Hannibal blamed himself.

“You were a child and you were dying of starvation. You shouldn’t feel responsible.”

“She was my responsibility. Though we were close in age, she was more my charge than my sister, and I allowed them to take her with barely a fight.” His head hung down further than Will had ever seen it. That proud bearing he normally wore was cast to the wayside in this rare moment of vulnerability.

“What happened?” Will asked, just as quietly.

Hannibal didn’t respond to his question at first as his eyes looked out thousands of miles away, past the polished windshield towards a snow-covered castle where he’d let go of the only person he’d loved until that point.

“...a few hours later they brought me a bowl of soup.” The distant sheen over his eyes turned wet, but no tears spilled. “I figured they’d gone out and caught a rabbit while I awaited my sister’s return.” He swallowed thickly, his tongue left his mouth for a second to wet his lower lip. “I remember asking if they fed Mischa first.”

Will pulled the car to the side of the highway. It was an empty stretch, low shoulders and no guardrails, with only the occasional car passing by in the opposite direction. Hannibal was deep in his memory, and Will could feel himself starting to become affected. The image of a deathly skinny blonde boy was clear before him, flooding his vision. He felt the hunger in his gut, his stomach acid trying to find any nutrition in the melted snow. His mouth watered at the scent of fresh stew, a delicacy after weeks of less than scraps.

He had no illusions about where the stew came from. Even rabbits would be hiding during a snowstorm and soldiers that were ruthless enough to kill a pair of unarmed parents just to use their home certainly wouldn’t continue to feed a dying girl.

Hannibal’s pathology was very specific, it didn’t just develop from nowhere.

“You remember how she tasted, don’t you,” Will said plainly, as kindly as he could.

“Like nothing else I’d tasted before or after,” he admitted.

“How did you realize?”

Hannibal smiled, a pained, cruel thing that was amused for cruelty’s sake. “They left her teeth in the bowl. Four of them, rattling along the bottom. All baby teeth — they didn’t have any defined roots.” Will could barely make out his next words. “I recognized the deformed canine she was born with.”

Will could see the image so clearly in his mind, the small child wrenched out of a moment of respite by the horror gifted to him. He’d surely dropped the soup.

“Did you cry? When you realized?”

“I was numb. I wanted to scream, but no words came out. I think I remember regretting dropping the bowl, because then I’d be even hungrier. It took me a long time to process that she was gone even after seeing the teeth.”

“How did you kill them? You were so young, it couldn’t have been easy.”

“I was very motivated and I knew the woods well. The first I killed quickly, the others…not so much.” There was vengeful pleasure in his tone, a certain satisfaction of a true belief that he had done right. In Will’s eyes, he did. No killing could be more deserved. “There’s a steep learning curve, but after the first I had enough experience to draw out the other’s more. To make it last. Torture isn’t the hardest skill to understand the basics of, and I had plenty of time to think of instruments I wanted to try.”

“Did you eat them too?”

“Of course. We were still low on food and it seemed only fair.”

Will saw that same skinny child, a crudely fashioned spear in hand and his mouth caked in drying blood. His eyes had dulled from the wide and scared irises of clung-to innocence to a predator’s in a blink. He seemed taller too, as if casting aside the weight of humanity had lightened his spine, unfurled him like a flower in the spring.

“How long until you were found?”

“I’m unsure of the exact details. Logically I know we spent a couple months with the soldiers and hunting them after took time, but I can’t give you an exact time scale. I know I turned twelve at some point during then, though perhaps that was just after I was taken to the orphanage.”

Will squeezed his hand again and he seemed to come back to himself a bit. As Will was no longer driving, he didn’t repress the urge to hold him with both hands.

“When did you stop speaking?”

“The last words I spoke for years were to Mischa.” Will stroked his hand slowly, soothing the subtle shake of his palm. “I told her they were going to make her feel better. After that, speaking just…lost its luster.”

Front seats weren't conducive for physical contact, but Will did his best to reach across the center console to lay his hand upon Hannibal's cheek. He matched the rhythm of his strokes to the gentle movement he was making against the back of Hannibal's hand.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, allowed the old memories to settle in the quiet air — dead, buried, and mourned until they couldn't endeavor to weaken the steel monster they lived inside any longer.

Even though Will had fallen into the role of comforter, just this tiny amount of contact was reassuring to him as well, despite the pain that lingered between them. It'd been quite a few days since Will allowed a kind touch, and though that was paltry compared to the months and years he'd gone without contact before, it wasn't a practice he was eager to resume. When desired, Hannibal's hands could heal just as easily as they hurt, and Will had been in a fair amount of pain recently, nevermind that Hannibal was the one who caused the majority of it.

He broke the silence softly, asking questions he knew his beautiful monster would have an easier time answering. "After that, when did you kill again?"

Hannibal's hand rose to cover Will's on his cheek and he leaned into the contact with a soft sigh. "I was fifteen, there was a boy at the orphanage. He was cruel to me, but I was strange, so that was to be expected. I found another when I was seventeen, just before I was sent to boarding school. I didn't have a reason that second time, I simply wanted to see the man die. Afterwards, I never found a reason to stop."

Will tried to picture it, how the knowledge of death that intimate from such a young age would shape a person. At eleven, Will had been worried about kids thinking he was strange and sweating in a trailer with no AC. At fifteen, he had resented his father and was trying to not get fired from the one tiny gas station that would hire him. He'd always been able to picture death easily, but if he experienced it that young, understood the power it held before his limbs had even finished growing, he's not sure what type of creature he would've become. Honestly, he should be astounded that Hannibal was as well-adjusted as he was.

Will didn't offer him any sympathetic words or firm absolution, both would likely be rejected anyway. He just held Hannibal close and never broke eye contact.

"Thank you for telling me," he said simply, knowing how much it cost him to do so.

"Anything for you, Will." He nodded softly, knowing the promise in Will's gaze. "Only for you."

He crossed the center console in one fluid movement, bringing his lips to Hannibal's in a short, firm press. They both needed the moment of reassurance and Will could feel the hard line of Hannibal's body relax minutely.

After a few more moments of sharing the space quietly, they broke apart and resumed their trek.

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The house had high glass windows and sat so close to the cliff's edge, it almost seemed it could tip right over. Even so, the house radiated less an aura of doomed anticipation than a promise for hopeful beginnings. Abigail's car was parked in the driveway, as if to cement the thought.

She met them at the front door with a brighter, wider smile than Will had ever seen on her face. Will opened his arms to gather her in a hug before a single doubt could manifest on her delighted expression.

"Are you going to stay with us?" she asked when he eventually let her pull away.

"If your other guardian behaves, for once." There was no bite in Will's words, he was too happy in this rare moment to put any real cynicism in his tone.

Still, she recoiled slightly at what he said, tilting her head — the movement more animalistic than typical. He wondered if she picked it up from Hannibal.

"Do you want us to stop?" *Us,* not *him.* That meant she planned on continuing to feed her monster that Hannibal worked so diligently to bring into this world.

"No," Will admitted. If anything, he'd like more to be included. "-but I'd like to see some restraint. Nothing that will hurt our family."

"Are you going to join us?" Her tone was too innocent for what she was implying, but she knew how to wield her cherubic face. She had a lot of experience pretending to be more innocent than she was.

Will looked back once at Hannibal, seeing his small, barely-there smile that urged Will to speak, to bind himself to this life they were trying to build fully.

He could do that for them, for *himself.* There was nothing else in this world that mattered more. Perhaps he could dedicate himself fully before they even left.

Will turned back to Abigail and nodded. Even without words, his conviction was firm.

She smiled at him again, that wide grin that stretched the frown lines that had already started to form on her young cheeks. Hannibal brushed past them, leading the charge inside after laying a hand on her shoulder and squeezing once.

As usual, once they were inside, Hannibal made his way to the kitchen, still limping. Will trailed behind as he heard Abigail keep in line with Hannibal. "Did something happen?" she asked him. Will did his best to keep his expression carefully neutral.

"Our dear Will was rather upset at your funeral. Which, I have to admit, was a fair reaction."

He heard her giggle from a room away. Hannibal hadn't broken his rule though, even in the kitchen, he stayed in Will's line of sight while Will examined the downstairs of the large, open-plan home they were in.

"Did he cause a scene?"

“Quite. I believe Alana might have a few words to say,” he pretended to whisper conspiratorially, though he intentionally kept his voice loud enough for Will to hear. “You’d attracted quite a few reporters, so he might even end up in the paper.”

“Not *one* reporter though.” She spoke of murder so casually. In the past, Will would have been horrified, worried for her psyche, but now he was just proud. She knew herself, she knew she was strong, and where she stood in their family and in this world they’d created. Lounds had caused her enough pain, she’d put Abigail’s lives, both the past she left behind and the new one she fostered with him and Hannibal, under the spotlight. Why shouldn’t Abigail gloat over conquering her?

Will wandered into the kitchen after them and took the cutting board and bell peppers Hannibal was slicing from his hands, nudging him with his hip. “I saw the scenes you left, Abigail. Both of them.”

“And? What did you think?” Her voice wasn’t nervous, she was confident in her own work.

“They were beautiful. An elegant forgery, and the antler child was masterfully constructed. Did you have any help?”

“Nope,” she popped the P and Will saw as pride transferred to the curve of her eyes. “My tutor was otherwise occupied.”

“And how do you feel about being dead? You won’t be able to live here any longer, not as Abigail Hobbs.” He didn’t particularly want to be having this conversation right away, not when it could shatter the domestic bubble they just regained, but he needed it out sooner rather than later.

“I’m not particularly attached to the name, and it wouldn’t have been the first time I’ve had to abandon a home.” She stole one of the peppers from Will’s cutting board in between downstrokes of his knife. Her reflexes were quick, never in any danger of lost fingers. “I’d rather live somewhere where I'm not watched constantly just for living.”

“It’s likely we’ll draw attention wherever we go. Mistakes happen, people notice too much. We might have to move again.”

“Then we’ll move, or I’ll move. I don’t plan on invading your guys’ weird little nest forever, and at least if I make a mistake, if I get caught, it’ll be because *I* screwed up, because *I’m* the one that’s dangerous. Not just because I’m the Shrike’s daughter.” She crunched down on the pepper and before she could wipe her fingers on her pants, Hannibal had already slid over a napkin with a pointed glare. Will watched him for a moment, scrutinizing the action and the man himself.

“You’ll be the daughter of the Ripper. Is that any better?”

“No one knows who he is. Right, Hannibal?” Her gaze fell behind Will’s shoulder where Hannibal was already rubbing some sort of herb mix into a slab of meat that Will was sure came from one of the recent scenes he’d been at.

“Unless Uncle Jack is hiding quite a bit more from us than I realized, then yes, you are correct.”

“It's different here, he’s not making me do anything I don’t want to.”

“Even that first one? I know you’re not the one who brought up the idea of killing, and I know he helped you with the first few.”

She looked behind him again, but when Hannibal just nodded, she smiled again. It was more reserved this time, fond, recalling a treasured memory.

“I didn’t know what I was missing. He helped me find it.”

“You’re a natural,” Hannibal encouraged. “I wish you could have seen her, Will. Like a sculptor to clay, that one.”

He repressed a flinch at Hannibal’s words. If Hannibal had just *told* him, he could have been there, he could have shared that moment with them. “I wish I could have seen that too,” he mumbled.

For once he heard Hannibal’s steps as he moved, whether it was intentional or because of his injury, Will wasn’t sure, but he anticipated the touch before it happened. Still, he leaned into the arm slung around the small of his back, landing on his opposite hip. “You’ll see the next, if Abigail is amiable of course.” She nodded enthusiastically and took the moment to steal another sliced pepper. “You weren’t ready before, you were also fighting against your own becoming.”

“Have I achieved my becoming? Is it to your satisfaction?” Will bit out.

“I’m satisfied as long as you are, my dear. If this is all the blood you wish to shed, then so be it. If you wish to kill again tomorrow, then I’ll gladly pick up every piece you left behind. In any circumstance, your mind no longer recoils with the values others have placed on you, and that freedom is all I ever wanted from you.” He nuzzled into the side of Will’s head and tightened the hand around his hip, comforting himself as much as he was soothing Will’s ire.

“Only your values are left,” he mumbled, but the fight had left him. “I’m not satisfied with the acts I’ve committed, I want more, but not now. Now we focus on leaving.”

“Oh? Do you have a place in mind?” Hannibal asked, as if Will didn’t already know that he had at least three separate escape routes and backup homes planned.

“No, but you do. Right?”

He rubbed Will’s hip with his thumb and kissed him gently on the cheek before pulling away. Obviously, Will was still mad, he still wanted a sort of retribution, but his body was still attuned to Hannibal’s. It was still soothed by his presence and soft touches, no matter the context. Perhaps that was part of the deal with being soulmates, or perhaps that was just the way he was wired now.

“I do. Would you prefer France or Italy?”

Will rolled his eyes. Hannibal would fit right in, he'd station himself as an art curator or a lecturer and find himself at the top of whatever high-class social hierarchy they ended up near. "France. At least I'll speak the language." And Will would get to see whatever society friends Hannibal made cringe at his Creole French. "But it's not just my opinion that matters. Abigail?"

She shrugged. "He's got me looking at universities all over Europe. I could visit on weekends and holidays if you wanted me to. He thinks I need to branch out on my own a bit more." She didn't seem opposed to the idea, in fact he detected excitement, curiosity, a heavy desire to explore the world on her own in a way she hadn't been allowed to at any point in her life so far. "As long as you give me gas money to get home."

"My dear, you shall never have to worry about money," Hannibal chimed in. There was a smile in his tone, even if it didn't reach onto the mask of his expression.

"Even if I want to go to Le Rosey?" she teased.

"I believe I have a couple connections there, it wouldn't be an issue."

Hannibal very well could have been lying, but Will would believe it. The man was well-traveled and well-respected enough to have connections wherever they went. Maybe a real punishment would be forcing him to move to a deserted island, no one around to kill or impress.

"Of course you do," Abigail mumbled. "Are the dogs coming with?"

"I don't see why not, but that is not my decision to make."

"Does wherever we're going have space for them?" Will raised his brow in Hannibal's direction.

"Not initially, but I sold the more enclosed properties months ago and found locations that would be more suitable." He couldn't help the warmth that spread to his face. It bubbled up from his chest and bloomed outward in response to consideration he should have come to expect by this point.

His anger was still present, but he knew that for every time Hannibal hurt him, twisted his knife in Will's gut, kept him bound and blinded, he also was harboring a certain sweetness that he did not bring to light for anyone else. Pain and suffering were the emotions Hannibal enacted on the world. He was the villain, the death-toting sadist, his own amusement was a far more important priority than any allowance for another person in his mind.

And he'd picked out homes that would accommodate Will's dogs. Of his own volition, without prompting.

Despite all the secrets he hid, he was still the man Will had fallen in love with, and really could Will denounce him as evil when he did not proclaim to be himself? They were conjoined. The only fault Will could truly find was his propensity for secrecy, and perhaps his partialness towards expensive frivolity.

“Good.” He hoped Hannibal couldn’t hear how choked the single word was. “When can we leave?”

“We could leave tonight, if you desired. Though there might be a few loose ends that need to be sorted.” Like the meat still in Will’s fridge and the meat still in Hannibal’s.

“Eventually someone’s going to find your basement,” Abigail chimed in brightly.

“Yes, that would be the loose end I was referring to.”

“Basement?”

“It's a real nightmare down there. Something out of a horror movie,” she said brightly.

Hannibal tutted and waved his spatula generally in her direction. “That’s an unfair comparison. I keep it very clean.”

“Yeah, *too* clean. Everything smells like bleach. You walk in and you know exactly what goes on down there. He laid out a whole table of weapons for me to use, like I would know what to do with a flail.”

“It’s practical, and I seem to recall you appreciating the variety offered.”

They continued to bicker lightly back and forth and Will could only think about how badly he wanted to see the room. He’d only just allowed himself to see the Ripper for who he was and accept him entirely into Will’s life. This was another aspect that would give him further insight that he craved desperately. The room might fall apart, images of all the people he’d killed and tortured there flashing behind his eyes as Will’s broke it down in his mind. The pendulum would swing and a deeper aspect of Hannibal would be given to him, with or without the man’s consent — he could feel it.

“We’ll leave in a week,” Will decided. “It’ll give us time to remove any evidence, but Abigail should go on ahead. Leave tonight or tomorrow. We’re not fugitives yet so we should make sure you’re able to leave. I’m guessing the fake passports are already in order?”

“Hers, yours, and mine,” Hannibal was quick to reassure. “Should the need arise. Scrutiny is not officially upon us yet, but I assume a few at the Bureau have their suspicions, especially after the last couple scenes.”

“Have they brought you in for questioning yet?”

“I believe they are waiting until they can bring the both of us in simultaneously, and it's of my knowledge that you’ve been rather uncooperative recently.” There was a heavy dose of pride in Hannibal’s tone, despite how light it was. It was infectious, even with the worrying circumstances, Will couldn’t bring himself to care. “But I would not worry in any case. We have an alibi.”

“And for the missing doctors at Port Haven? Those are going to be attributed to the Ripper as well, they’re a link to Abigail, which is a link to you.”

“Do you not remember, Will? You were my alibi then as well. If I recall correctly, Uncle Jack even gave us a personal visit, and you were ever so quick to dismiss him.” It was startling to see how far back this stretched, how long he’d missed the signs that were right in front of him. That was a night that Will recalled as significant because it was a further step in their intimacy, but simultaneously Abigail had been out gutting her victim.

“You used me,” Will admonished. “Again.”

“My intentions involving your presence were to have you over for dinner, just that was enough to serve my purposes. Anything else that occurred was born of genuine emotion. Do not pretend you don’t realize that, Will.”

“Gross,” Abigail muttered.

Hannibal huffed out a quick breath that could have passed for a laugh. “You should probably be packing if you’re to leave soon, yes?”

“Fine, but I’m going to destroy the house before you guys get there. Gonna drink all the liquor and leave all the windows open for the bugs to get in.”

“Lock the doors at least,” Hannibal played along. “Wouldn’t want any break-ins.”

“If anyone breaks in, I’ll gut them.”

“Stock the fridge in the meantime?” Hannibal poured a high splash of red wine into the pan he was stirring.

“Of course. Wouldn't want it to go to waste.” She laughed once before she hopped down and left the room in a flourish.

Will watched her go for a moment before turning back to the vegetables he was chopping. She seemed happy, all things considered, and that might have been the worst part.

“You forced her,” Will stated, not a question. He knew how Hannibal’s ‘persuasions’ worked.

“I gave her a choice.”

“Let me guess, she could either kill and stay with you, or preserve her innocence and remain at the institute.”

“What innocence was there to preserve? Her role in her father’s kills was not small and she murdered Nicolas Boyle of her own volition. The only change I provided was a controlled environment.” Hannibal didn’t pause his quick hands for a second, but Will knew he was more than easily able to multitask.

“She could have lived an easy life, free of more bloodshed. You could have given her that,” Will accused half-heartedly.

“I could have,” Hannibal agreed. “But I didn’t deem to, and eventually she would have grown curious.” He turned the heat down to a simmer and grabbed the vegetables Will had finished dicing. “You are aware of my nature, Will, I deemed you would be happier having accepted your becoming as well.”

“She seems happier.” Will hadn’t witnessed any of her kills, only the aftermath, so all he had to rely on were tainted words and the manipulated emotions he could gain from Abigail. “I thought she was happy that day we went fishing.”

“She was. On the drive back to the facility she made me recount the names of every beast in your pack so she wouldn’t forget.” He covered the lid to the saucer after adding the vegetables to the meat and broth and joined Will as he reclined against the counter. “She’s happier now that you’re here and that you accept her for what she is.”

“What you shaped her to be.”

“I gave her the tools, I did not force her hand, as I never forced yours. Are you seeking repentance? Because I shall tell you now that I feel no regret towards any of my actions involving either of you. They have led us to this moment, and there is nowhere else I’d rather be.” Hannibal didn’t attempt to touch him, so Will moved instead, resting his hand on top of Hannibal’s, flat on the counter.

“I already took the actions I wanted, the rest will fall into place soon enough. There’s nothing I can do to shake Abigail’s formation now that she’s got a taste for it.”

“Would you want to? Our family would likely not function if one was left out.”

“Did it fail to function when I was?”

“Yes,” he said plainly, turning his hand around to interlace their fingers.

“I doubt it.”

“Do you honestly imagine we would be here without your influence?”

“No, I can’t say that I do.” He knew that without him, Hannibal would still be out there ripping and hosting dinner parties and ignoring the paved-over gash inside of him. Without Hannibal, Will would be nursing his own gaping wound and poorly tamped-down urges.

Hannibal sighed and ran his thumb over Will’s knuckle. “Our life here will come to an end soon. I will not try to curb the beast I awakened in our daughter, but I can restrain myself, if that is what you desire.”

He wasn’t lying, Will had learned all his non-existent tells by now.

“I believe you,” Will said, catching his gaze in the fading light of sunset. The orange hues turned his maroon eyes a bright red.

A beat passed. Nothing had truly changed between them, not really. Hannibal was just as much the man who brought him soup in the hospital as the man who orchestrated their

daughter's funeral.

"I love you, Will." There was nothing in his voice other than plain devotion.

"Is what you feel for me as mundane as love?"

"For all my knowledge and experience, I could never find a word to encompass the emotions you've inspired in me, but love is the closest one I have."

Will kissed him once, still chaste and closed-mouth, but lingering.

"I love you too."

Hannibal smiled — one rarely wide and genuine — squeezed his hand once, and pulled away to finish making their dinner.

——

By the time Abigail returned from her room and dinner was finished, almost an entire hour had passed. She plopped down a suitcase that seemed too light to contain all her possessions, but Will figured that whatever else she wanted to keep could be shipped over. In the time she was gone, she'd cut her hair into an uneven bob, like she'd just taken a dull pair of scissors to a low ponytail.

Will raised a brow and chuckled under his breath as she grabbed a plate and loaded it up, not allowing Hannibal to dress it with his usual flair. "Should I ask?"

"Figured I should look a little less like Abigail Hobbs, that's all." She ran her fingers through her hair and moved her head slightly so the tips would brush against her jaw. She was still getting used to the weight and the new shape.

"I like it."

"Good," she said proudly. "Hannibal?"

"It suits you, though you will let me even it out before you leave."

"I thought I did a pretty good job, but fine." Will watched her fingers play with the uneven ends while she ate — she'd wanted Hannibal to fix it. He could feel her relief that she didn't have to ask. "Am I leaving tonight?"

"First light tomorrow, if that is acceptable," Hannibal decided.

She groaned at the thought of having to get up early, but it was a token protest. "Yeah, fine. You got me a flight?"

"Of course, Baltimore to O'Hare to Paris, where there will be instructions on how to make it to the villa."

"It's been a while since I've been to Chicago."

“I doubt you’ll have time to see much of the city, but you're welcome to try.” Hannibal flashed her a toothy grin and grabbed an envelope from the counter drawer. “You’ll need your passport and some cash, I’m sure.”

Will could see a few thick folds of bills banded together inside the envelope. He didn’t even want to know what Hannibal considered appropriate ‘walking around money.’

“Take a picture of the Bean for me,” Will teased.

She promised she would if she got the time and rifled through the bills and papers and eagerly fiddled with the hem of her clothing. She was excited, anticipating the second chance she never thought she was going to get.

They dropped her off at the Baltimore airport as the sun was rising, just as Hannibal said. The drive from the cliff house wasn’t short by any means, but, with Hannibal’s insistence, they’d made it with plenty of time to spare. Will went over the checklist in his head one more time.

“You have your passport?”

“Yep.”

“Wallet?”

“Yep.”

“Plane tickets?”

“On my phone.”

“You have your phone, right?”

She pulled it out of her pocket and waved it in Will’s face.

“And you have our numbers in case anything goes wrong?”

“If anything goes wrong, at least one of us is going to end up in prison, so hopefully nothing does.”

Will barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes, Abigail didn't though. She was clearly over his ‘worried parent’ routine.

She pulled them both into a hug, Will didn't even hesitate before wrapping his arms around her. He was getting better at accepting affection.

“You will have a safe trip,” Hannibal stated definitively, as if speaking the words into existence would make them true. Maybe for him, it truly was as simple as that.

“We’ll see you soon, Abby.” Will didn't cry, and didn't feel worried. There was no reason to. She waved just once before wheeling her bags into the terminal, and didn't look back at them once she was inside.

Chapter End Notes

holy FUCK its been so long im so sorry. BUT the fic is DONE ITS DONNEEEE im gonna drop a chap a day until the full thing is posted thank for waiting yall love and kisses mwah

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I want to see the basement.”

“Shall I take us there now?”

“Yeah, if it's not too much trouble,” Will sneered.

They turned on to the main road away from the airport, the Bentley easily purring into a low cruise. Hannibal would probably just buy another one once they were in France, but Will hoped he had some attachment to this particular car.

“It is certainly not, you need only ask.”

“Didn’t know I was supposed to. What should I be expecting?”

“Our charge was fairly thorough, if a tad disparaging. It serves its purpose and is designed for functionality and cleanliness.”

“You made sure it would be easy to get blood off the cement and tile.”

“More or less.”

How many victims had he eviscerated down there? More than the FBI knew of certainly, and more than Hannibal cared to keep track of. It wasn’t just used for simple murder though, Will knew that, it would be a combination torture chamber and art studio. Every instrument he used to shape the bodies and turn them into the horrifying creations he made would be there. Will was excited already.

“Any surprises waiting for me?”

“I’d like to leave some to the imagination, though I’m sure you’ve pieced together most of it. You *do* know me better than anyone else.”

A subtle heat rose in him at the fond tone. Will feared he may never grow used to his attention, no matter how much he was exposed to it, and honestly he didn’t want to.

“Is there a breaking wheel? An iron maiden?”

“You know I’d never use something so archaic. It would ruin the presentation, also it's far more satisfying to pull out the sounds with your own hands, with only the barest help from a tool.” He spoke so plainly, as if he were referring to the weather instead of torturing people to death.

Will wanted to tap into that cruelty, see it turned towards the world rather than at him. “So basically, ‘get more creative?’ ‘Torture is an art to be mastered’ and all that?”

“It is. A rather fine one comparable to painting with oils. Though, as I said, I need not continue to pursue it, should you not wish me to, Will.”

“I’m not asking that of you, not entirely. Some practiced restraint would be nice — no more puns at the dinner table and feeding the FBI their own evidence, but no, I don’t want you to stop.” He took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. “I don’t resent you, Hannibal, any part of you. I resent what you did to me, how you used me and kept me blind.”

“That’s a wound only time and kept promises will heal. In the meantime, what would you have me do?”

“Stay close to me, always, as you vowed you would and talk to me as if I’m an extension of yourself. We’re not mirrored reflections, we’re of the same blood. Do that, and I’ll let you know when I want you off the leash again.”

“One being split down the middle, the four-armed form of the original man before he was doomed to roam this earth halved. What should I expect at the ‘right time’?”

“Bloodshed, but as that is your natural state, I’m sure it comes as a relief.”

“Will it be a sacrifice or an offering when the time comes? Shall I expect to have your company?”

“Haven’t decided yet. For now you should focus on clearing your basement.”

“After I give the full tour, of course.”

“Of course.”

They approached Chandler Square and there Hannibal’s home was, as familiar and looming as ever. It wasn’t far past sunrise, they had all day together to begin to sort out what they needed to.

Apparently, one of their mutual acquaintances wasn’t so keen on the idea. Alana’s white four-door was perched in the driveway, right next to Will’s car, just out of the way of the garage. Will could see her waiting in the front seat.

“Aw, hell.”

“It seems we’re in store for a confrontation.”

“I definitely am,” Will groaned. “I think you’re off the hook, at least with her.”

“Then perhaps I can lessen the blow.”

“Doubt it, but you’re welcome to try.”

Her head picked up when she saw the garage door opening, apparently she'd been resting against the steering wheel and hadn't noticed their approach. They'd both left their phones here last night — it's always best to avoid the possibility of the FBI tapping into the tracking services, even if they weren't technically suspects at this point.

Hannibal ushered her inside with all his usual grace, his limp barely noticeable. Will grumbled internally that apparently the man could just walk off a stab wound like it was nothing.

"I stopped by last night, but no one was here and neither of you were picking up your phones." Her voice wasn't accusing, not yet, but he could tell she was gearing up for an altercation.

"My apologies, Alana," Hannibal easily cut in. "We spent the night in Wolf Trap and I asked that we both keep our phones away for the evening. You can imagine that it was a difficult time for us."

"I went to Wolf Trap after. No one was home."

"Dear Will and I went for a drive that lasted quite a bit longer than I expected. There's been studies shown that difficult conversations are often most easily approached when driving, the close quarters and easy focal points lessen the stress placed on the individuals involved."

"Should I ask about the 'difficult conversation' you were apparently still having at eleven at night?"

"No, actually." Will cut her off before she could go any further. He still felt a bit bad about doing this to her, alienating her and shutting her out when she made such strides for him, but this was how it had to be if he didn't want her ending up dead. Prying eyes got torn out, and Will wouldn't hesitate to be the perpetrating hand now that he'd finally gotten what he wanted.

"No?" she asked, following them in Hannibal's kitchen where he immediately began fiddling with his French press. They'd already eaten an early breakfast with Abigail at the cliff house and consumed their travel mugs of coffee, but the man was nothing if not a thoughtful host.

"No. It's private," Will firmly stated.

"I'm not trying to start an argument, I just want to understand what's going on. I want to help, I know that Abigail's death hit you both hard."

"I'm not either, but neither of us asked you to mediate, so I'd appreciate it if you stopped trying to involve yourself." His words were harsh and only half-regretted. As much as she didn't deserve to be hurt like this, she also was butting in where she wasn't wanted. Even if Will wasn't planning on running away with two serial killers (at least by the strict definition) he'd probably still think her actions were inappropriate.

"Hannibal? Please, I'm only trying to help." Apparently deciding that Will was a lost cause, she turned her attention to the other man. "Please just talk to me, tell me what's going on."

“Well, if you must know, Will and I are planning on moving. It should take about a week to get our combined affairs in order.” It *would* be smart to let Alana know first, she’d surely do the legwork of informing everyone else and it would make the operation seem less like a tactical retreat, though Will wondered where Hannibal had in mind to say they were disappearing to.

“What?” Alana’s voice was soft and clearly confused. “You’re moving?”

“Yes, up to Montreal. Both Will and I speak French and we agreed that it was time for a change in scenery.”

“But…what about your patients? And Will, Jack still needs you—”

“I talked to Jack already. I’m done. You were right, the work isn’t good for me.” Will couldn’t bring himself to put any mourning in his voice over that fact.

Hannibal finished using the press that Will still hadn’t figured out how to operate and produced some homemade creamer from the fridge. “You don’t have to worry about my patients, I’ve already given all the appropriate referrals.”

She seemed shell-shocked for a moment, clearly not equipped to deal with what they were throwing at her. If Will had to guess, she came here with the intention of starting a conversation about trauma, to give them an outlet outside of each other, maybe recommending a spot of couple’s counseling for bonded pairs if she detected abuse on Will’s end. She did not expect this though, and he could see that she was thrown off.

“I don’t-” she cleared her throat, composing herself remarkably quickly. “In my professional opinion, I don’t believe it would be the healthiest option to move. Do either of you have family up there? Friends? Even jobs lined up? Grief isn’t solved by fleeing the source and it won’t help to abandon your support structures. Hannibal, you know this.”

Will had to admit, she made a compelling argument. It was backed with a firm psychological basis too, she was good.

“We shall have each other and money is not a concern; I have plenty to support us until we find our ways towards other positions.” Hannibal slid the mug of coffee in her direction. She picked it up only because it seemed she had nothing better to do with her hands.

“You can’t just claim one person is enough. One person is not a support structure.”

“He’s my soulmate,” Will interjected, knowing she had no personal experience on the topic, knowing it would sting to point that out. We’re all the family either of us has got left. The decision was mutual, Alana.”

“...What about your dogs?”

Will could tell she was getting desperate — grasping at straws now that facts and logic ceased to persuade.

“They can come with. None of them get car sick that easily and we’ll take lots of breaks.”

Her patience and good faith seemed to finally run short. The turn of her mouth and set of her eyes hardened, she was preparing to land a blow she actually expected to hit.

“It was your idea, wasn’t it, Will?”

“I made the suggestion first, yes.” Even though Hannibal had clearly anticipated this decision.

“What you’re doing, it's not healthy. First you shut everyone out, including him, your *soulmate* , then you take out your anger on him, *twice* — Jack told me about what happened on the scene — and now you’ve convinced him to leave everything behind including his practice? It’s not right. Hannibal, you don’t have to let him treat you this way just because he’s your soulmate.” She was panting slightly by the time she finished, her shoulders moving up and down with the deep breaths she was taking.

Hannibal smiled softly at her. It was as fake as any expression Will had seen plastered on him, but Alana wouldn’t know any better. “I’m afraid that you are mistaken, Dr. Bloom. This decision was as much mine as it was Will’s and I’m very happy with our arrangement.” He made his way to Will’s side and slung a possessive arm across the small of his back to land on his opposite hip, emphasizing his point. Will leaned back into him marginally — he always had a hard time resisting the warm press of Hannibal’s body.

“We would both like the time and space to grieve and rebuild,” he continued. “I do not require your understanding of this decision.” He was gentler than when Will spoke to her, but still firm and immovable. People tended to not question his perceived authority. He always gave off the air of a person who had their shit together much more than anyone else, so obviously he knew what he was doing.

Alana was one of the few people who seemed able to push back against him, typically maintaining her own stance even in the face of his sternness. It seemed now wasn’t one of those instances though. Her lips pursed slightly, like she was trying to think of another reason to list, but they’d all been resolutely shot down.

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair and pulling at the tips. “Jack wants you both to give a statement. He might not let you leave until the investigation is done.”

“We’ll talk to him, give our statements,” Will said. “But unless we’re being charged with something, we don’t have to stay, and honestly I’d prefer to be as far away from this as possible.”

“I just don’t understand. You don’t even want to catch Abigail’s killer?”

“Catching him won’t bring her back, and I’d rather leave before he takes anything else from me.” He rested his hand on Hannibal’s, still perched firmly on his hip. Alana didn’t have a partner or any dependants, and as well-versed as she was in resolving family conflict, her lack of personal experience would make her feel like an outsider here, like she wasn’t allowed to intrude.

Finally, she broke his gaze and turned away slightly — Will was getting better at winning the battle of eye contact. “I can’t force you to stay, but I still want it to be known that I think you’re making a mistake. Both of you.”

“Noted, and as always, I value your insight.” Hannibal was polite as ever, but Will could see his cruel streak just under the surface. He’d enjoy whatever pain he inflicted here, even after years being her friend and mentor. “However, our decision is firm and the property has already been procured. Perhaps we shall visit at some point, though I imagine the next few months shall be quite busy.”

In her agitation, she hadn’t done more than grip the coffee mug Hannibal offered her tightly. She set it down without taking a single sip, sighing heavily through her nose.

“You still have a week. I hope you will come to your senses.” She caught Hannibal’s eyes; his stayed silently amused in the wake of the desperation in hers. “ *Please* call me if you need anything at all.” She directed her plea at Hannibal alone, but Will expected that at this point.

With her final words, she excused herself and left, knowing there was no more she could say.

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The basement was mostly as Abigail described — clean to the point of suspicion, as if the torture devices and dissection tools weren’t evidence enough, though Will knew this was going to be a slasher set as soon as Hannibal expertly found the hidden latch perfectly nestled in between the floorboards in his pantry.

Will wondered how many bodies he’d hauled down here. The walls were sound-proofed, so it was likely that many of his victims were alive when he brought them to this room. If he was navigating the stairs down with all that extra weight, it was no wonder why he was able to carry Will with ease.

He turned around and walked out before Hannibal could give the full tour.

“Will—?”

“I want to try something.”

Hannibal followed him to the hatch and Will flopped down onto the ground right on the pantry floor.

“Alright, I’m ready. Show me the Ripper, pretend I’m your victim.” That gave Hannibal pause for a moment, but the man was adaptable to a fault, so he quick;y subdued his expression into his typical neutral mask. “Go change. There’s no way you’d risk your suits getting covered in pig’s blood.”

He huffed out a quick laugh before heading back into the basement. “Of course, Will. Should I bring the paralytics as well? If we’re going for realism.”

“Just the outfit. Maybe a scalpel, but I feel like that’s part of the ensemble. Don’t worry, I can pretend to be sedated. I’m very good at just lying down.”

He disappeared back down the hatch. The stairs didn't creak under his feet, even now his steps were almost silent.

Will laid his head back on the ground and spread out his limbs, splayed like a pinned butterfly. He hadn't noticed the other times he was in Hannibal's home, but the whole place was oppressively quiet. With the high walls and wooden flooring, there was almost a cave-like echo, which paired with the dark and macabre decor, made the entire place even more ridiculously intimidating. And that was even discounting the absurd murder basement. From how much even small sounds carried, it was impressive that the home's sole occupant could move silently inside it.

He didn't hear Hannibal come up the stairs, he just saw movement in the corner of his eye as he stared up at the ceiling a second before the man came into view. There was no stopping the laugh that bubbled out of his throat when he saw Hannibal's full form looming over him.

"My god, what are you wearing?" He still had on the suit from before, but now there was a plastic one over top. His surgical gloves were tucked neatly into the sleeves and when Will picked his head up to see the rest of him, he could see plastic coverings over his shoes. "I'm surprised you're not wearing a hair net."

"I prefer gel and a careful grooming routine. Aesthetics are important, Will, and there's a certain one I aim to adhere to."

"Yeah, I get it — it's harder to scare people when you look like you work at a deli counter." He chuckled to himself at his own joke, relishing the exasperated look on Hannibal's face.

"I thought you desired authenticity, my dear. Usually my victims aren't this chatty."

"And I doubt you usually leave them on the floor this long. It's unsanitary, Dr. Lecter. This meat has surely passed the five second rule." Will laid his head back down and lifted his arms, making small clutching hands, splaying his fingers then clenching his fists repeatedly.

Hannibal hoisted him up easily, one arm around Will's back and the other below his knees. Will went limp, letting his arms dangle and his head lull back. The first step into the basement felt like crossing a threshold, like a newlywed being carried to his bridal suite. The context was oddly fitting — this was symbolic of the permanent bond he'd forged with the Ripper, he could already feel the metaphorical layers being shed the further they stepped inside.

Hannibal navigated the stairs with ease, barely jostling Will despite the added weight. He'd certainly had enough practice hauling bodies to and fro to find the proper way to shift his weight and counter-balance for Will's. He'd probably toted bodies far heavier, though Will was not particularly small or slim.

The suit didn't squeak as they moved. Will was almost disappointed.

Each step down was reminiscent of the pendulum being swung. With every step of descent into the chamber of cement walls, stainless steel work tables, and bleach, Will slipped further into the mind of a true victim of the Ripper, or tried to at least. He couldn't help from

attempting to slip into the Ripper's head instead. Hannibal's soft smile, for once open and unguarded, drew him in, begged him to see the pleasure in the act.

Will did. Of course he did after all this time.

There was a chair in the center of the room with multiple restraints for every extremity — two for each arm at the wrist and elbow, two for the legs, one around the hips, chest, and neck, and one to hold the head in place. It almost looked like an electric chair, though Will knew the executions performed here were not so brief.

Hannibal set him down more gently than he likely treated his real victims, though he didn't hesitate to fasten the strap around Will's neck. It was tight, not enough to cut off his air supply, but enough to choke him should Will decide to try to move. The strap pressed against his Adam's apple when he swallowed.

"Not bothering to clamp down my arms and legs? Seems like an oversight."

"All in due time. Might I remind you that you are supposed to be unconscious right now?"

Will shrugged and let his body go partially limp, though he kept his neck supported, not that he could move his head much anyway.

Hannibal approached him, invading his space suddenly. Even with all the fanfare and the ghosts around that surely haunted this place, Will was not frightened. Anticipation flowed within him and a confusion he didn't yet understand swirled around in tumultuous waves. The other man stooped down slightly, his hands disappearing below Will's line of sight as he began to undo the buttons of his flannel. His fingers were as quick and gentle as ever, but Will still felt a tinge of apprehension as Hannibal slowly undressed him.

"You're sure taking your time, considering I'm supposedly unconscious. Some people might assume you have even more nefarious proclivities, Dr. Lecter."

"Perhaps in this specific instance, their assumptions might not be far off. I cannot honestly say I have placed a single person in your seat that was quite so lovely." He pulled off the flannel with a surprising amount of ease that betrayed his experience with the very act. "None that were quite so talkative either." Hannibal left his undershirt be for the moment — it wouldn't be so easy to remove with the restraint still tight around Will's neck.

His quick fingers didn't pause when they moved towards the zipper of Will's jeans, not that Will expected them to. He didn't ask if he could continue undressing him, the headspace would've been broken if he did, and they had long passed any reservations about hurting each other. Will had to admit he'd adopted, at least in part, the other man's pursuits of aesthetics.

In less than a minute, he was completely bare, except for his thin undershirt. Goosebumps began to form on his naked skin, apparently this was the one room in Hannibal's home without heated floors.

"Better be quick when you undo the strap around my neck. I could wake up and try to bolt."

Hannibal smirked, dangerous and charming and still unreasonably attractive. It was filled with far more affection for him than it should be if Hannibal was supposedly looking at one of his pigs, but Will wouldn't disparage this one lack of realism. Any true derision on the man's face would be falsified, and he wasn't sure he could handle it.

"Do you believe that I am an amateur, Will?" He fastened the straps around Will's wrists, then his ankles. He continued until the only part of him that wasn't restrained was his torso.

"You're going to have a hard time getting to my organs with my shirt still in the way," Will taunted, though his sharp, pointed confidence was beginning to drain. He wasn't sure what would replace it, but anticipation still sat in his gut like a stone.

Hannibal picked up a pair of surgical shears from the wall of hanging tools behind him and began to cut away the last shred of clothing Will wore. At any other time, he'd protest the loss of a perfectly good undershirt, but Hannibal had been merciful so far in allowing the rest of his clothing to remain whole.

Will had to assume he wasn't so considerate with the rest of his victims.

"Typically, now is the time you would begin to come to. These walls are sound proofed of course, but a few of my guests have been overly talkative." He grabbed a long, thin cloth from the rack behind him and folded it a few times length wise. "As my current one seems to be."

Will glared at him. Naked and restrained, he now felt more like one of Hannibal's victims than he ever had. With the gag, the separating line would be even thinner. He asked for this though, he wanted to see this side of his soulmate, but that didn't mean he had to comply perfectly. Hannibal's other victims certainly wouldn't.

"Come now, love. I'd rather not force you." He smiled calmly and presented the gag, as if Will would take it like he was being fed.

"Go to hell," Will spat through clenched teeth.

His eyes softened, like he was proud of the bite in Will's voice. He probably was, he didn't like Will for his passiveness after all.

For a moment, when his fingers lightly caressed Will's jaw, Will thought he was going to be gentle, despite all the work he put in to tying him down. It *would* be its own form of torture, but the Ripper wasn't ever gentle or considerate, and Will had demanded an audience with him, not his caring, manipulative lover.

The soft touch turned punishing in an instant. Hannibal dug his thumb and forefinger into opposite sides of Will's jaw, hitting a pressure point hard that forced his mouth open with a protested grunt. He stuffed the gag inside and tied it around the back of Will's head swiftly. As with everything he did in this room, the motion was practiced and precise.

"You really do make such a lovely image like this, Will. In the future, I may have to insist that I see it again."

Will could only stare daggers at him, though his expression was undercut by his bare, half-hard cock, stiffening under the power that Hannibal wielded like the scalpel that he just slipped from his sleeve.

“I’ve never truly hidden my enjoyment of suffering from you, Will. If I recall, you were thrilled when I invited you to dinner and you were able to witness a man that was less proper than you believed. Every time we kissed and made love, you bit me back with as much vigor as I bestowed upon you. You have killed for me, love, and I know that you will again. It is only natural, and you shall descend as inevitably and unstoppably as the formation of the marks we bear.” Hannibal traced the features of his face with the non-whetted edge of the scalpel, as if he was testing where would be best to slide the blade in.

Will could not respond, he only grunted against the gag. He wanted to protest instinctively against Hannibal’s bold proclamation, but really, what was there to protest? Had he not already crossed the threshold and blurred the line’s very existence?

He knew he wanted to hurt people, and he wanted to do it at Hannibal’s side, to revel in it together. He didn’t want to be passive any longer.

Here in this chair — naked, gagged, bound, and squirming — he couldn’t spare a shred of empathy for the countless victims who sat here before him. Hannibal had succinctly stolen it all, Will only wanted to be on the other side of the scalpel at this moment, and it was beginning to become clear as to why — not out of fear of pain or embarrassment. No, Will wanted to enact a design, and he would no longer be the unaware victim that could only idly respond to Hannibal’s machinations.

His personal liberation would have to wait until Hannibal finished with him here though. Will wouldn’t halt the show, even if he were physically able to.

“I’m glad you’ve calmed down some. Typically, I do not care much if my guests are hearing what I have to say, but you, Will, you know I always desire your attention.” He first laid the scalpel upon Will’s cheekbone, just below his eye. “If you recall from our more recent merging, you took a fair bit of blood from me. No more than I was willing to give, but you asked to meet the Ripper, and he is not so generous with himself, so he will desire blood in turn.”

He sliced open Will’s cheek slowly, just one single line, deep enough to feel the trickle down his cheek and into the cloth of the gag, but shallow enough to clot quickly and likely not scar. The cut stung more than it hurt, heightened by the fact that the path of his scalpel was achingly slow. This was a show of his sadism, as he’d promised, so he undoubtedly would bring more pain than pleasure.

Any pleasure at all was more than he afforded the people Will was standing in for. A small slice to his cheek was but a gentle kiss in comparison.

Hannibal sighed fondly and swiped away the blood with his gloved thumb, almost regretfully. They’d never been shy of skin to blood contact before this.

“This is quite the display of trust, so perhaps you would appreciate one in turn.” He brought his scalpel down towards Will's bare chest, along the side of his ribcage. “Typically I enjoy telling my guests exactly what’s in store for them, brings back my time in surgery when each dissection was surrounded by a flock of trainees. But, I believe a better use of our time here would be to expose a vulnerability I would be reluctant to share otherwise.”

Will would’ve rolled his eyes if he wasn’t so on edge. He knew Hannibal wouldn’t hurt him, not enough to impair him at least, but he was naked and bound in front of a predator wielding his preferred weapon. It was a natural reaction for his body to be so tense.

That didn’t mean he couldn’t be exasperated with Hannibal’s need to hear himself speak. Will just raised a brow in response.

Hannibal made the first cut expertly through a few layers of skin, just enough to make him bleed. He pressed his free hand down hard on Will’s chest, feeling it shutter as Will pulled in deep breaths from his nose.

“You’re so strong now, love. I’m cutting into you at this very moment, yet you’re not making a sound, not a shred of protest.”

Will narrowed his gaze and clenched his jaw. *What protest could I make?*

“You always find a way to retaliate, I have every faith in you.”

He followed the path of Will’s lung, tracing it with his scalpel on the outside of Will’s skin.

“Do you remember how vulnerable you were? You were so scared of yourself, of what paths your mind would lead you down.” He finished the outline of one lung and moved to the next, keeping the trail slow and drawn-out. There was heat swelling in his gut, though the pain from the stinging slice kept him reserved.

For a moment, Hannibal simply concentrated on carving out the second lung, allowing Will to stew in stinging pain and anticipation for his words. “So easy to take advantage of.”

Will grunted out the first sound he made since the gag was put in place. It wasn’t in protest of the pain, no, the feeling of his skin parting under Hannibal’s blade had a tinge of heady intimacy that set him alight, but there was a part of him that could never acknowledge the weakness Hannibal spoke of.

“Sleep was so elusive for you. Your dreams that terrified you followed you to your waking hours, yet you slept so soundly in my presence.” He finished the second lung and placed his hand firmly on Will’s heart, feeling his jumping pulse. “Did you never question it? Or were you so grateful for rest that you neglected to understand its source. I do not blame you though, darling. Your life recently has come at you with the speed and ferocity of a lion pursuing its prey.”

As he spoke, Hannibal lightly carved out the veins and valves of the muscle, as if he were painting. The thickness and depth of each pass of the blade was varied, using multiple tilts

and pressures to give a more accurate rendition. Will had no doubt in his mind that it would be accurate, the doctor had a plethora of examples to have studied.

Will's breath stuttered and hitched, his teeth clenching down against the gag, wetting it slightly with an uncontrolled spot of drool. The pain from the pass of the scalpel was tinted with the endorphins released, along with his blooming need to retaliate, held securely down by his bindings.

Hannibal had hurt him, more than this now, and more than Will had previously been aware of, but he was admitting it all freely now, without prompts or threats. Will wanted to shout at him, demanding to know if he thought he could simply be forgiven by admittance, but still he was held back, forced to take his blade and his words.

His hand fell to Will's abdomen, the latex of his glove now streaked with red. Will's stomach jumped and pulsed under his intrusive touch, still responsive to him, as always.

"Would you believe me if I said I truly wished to aid your slumber? Perhaps not, as I doubt you will believe that it was for your own benefit that I delayed your admittance to a hospital — the distinctive scent of encephalitis was obvious even under that horrible aftershave you used to wear." He leaned in, smelling along Will's neck as he pressed down even harder. He was close enough that Will could bite him, even with the negligible mobility of his head. It was the barest scrap of power, but before Will could decide if he wanted to take it, Hannibal withdrew. "I am glad you've decided to use one more…complimentary to your scent."

His liver was the next target. Hannibal dug his fingers in until he apparently found what he was looking for, and began to carve. The flesh here was tender and sensitive, and it made the stinging pain all the more intense, but at the same time, as Hannibal moved his free hand further down, Will couldn't help but react.

He groaned into the gag, stimulated in ways he never thought possible. Contradictory, confusing thoughts swirled in his head, all urging him to act further than his restraints allowed. He'd *asked* for this though, to be treated as the Ripper's victim, he knew that freedom of movement, the possibility of retaliation, was not something he would be allowed.

Once his liver was outlined, Hannibal moved to his kidneys. Will was beginning to feel light-headed, attributed to blood loss, and the rest that was still in his body rushing south.

"You're feeling frustrated now, aren't you, Will. You want to react, more than your restraints will allow you. Do you want to hurt me? Most of my guests in this chair do, so what sets you apart?" he taunted, listening closely though he knew Will couldn't respond.

As Will could not look down, he couldn't tell the organ he was carving out now. One might think that after the many sets of eviscerated innards he'd seen, he would have a bit more anatomical knowledge, but he wasn't typically the one digging inside.

He did have a certain urge to correct that experience. Perhaps Hannibal would show him one day.

For a moment, Hannibal stopped carving. He glanced up at Will's pinched expression with one of his own that was uncharacteristically soft. "I only jest, I know where you differ intimately. You do not want to retaliate because I am hurting you, or that I've taken advantage of your vulnerability in the past."

If Will could speak, he would protest, but he couldn't, so he had to sit still and acknowledge the truth of Hannibal's words.

"You want to hurt me simply because you can, because it would feel good."

He dropped the scalpel to the floor with a clatter and held the sides of Will's jaw, smearing his blood across the ridge of bone.

"Right now though, your deepest desire is to be on the other side of this exchange. You want to be the one carving, feeling the live blood, not holding onto any reservation out of care and respect, as I am. No, you want your knife to pierce all the way down to the marrow."

He began to loosen the knot of the gag, but he did not let it fall from Will's lips yet. "Do you imagine me in your place? Or do you imagine me at your side, praising the depth of your cuts?"

Will spit the cloth from his mouth the moment it was loose enough, gasping a heaving breath as he did so.

"I don't need to restrain you to make you bleed. You allow me freely," Will said as soon as he pulled in enough air to speak. "And I don't need your guidance to hurt people."

"I never offered my guidance, merely observation." He fell to his knees suddenly, grasping Will's thighs and looked up at him through partially lowered lashes. "Unless you wish me to participate."

Observation was a form of participation in some regards. By simply observing, without attempting to heed or hinder the act, one can still be an accomplice, but Will had spent most of his life observing. He could *see* and regurgitate everything around him, every pressing mind. So rarely did he instigate, he was reactionary.

He wanted to participate though. More than participate, he wanted to start and finish and not be held by the restraints his mind put on him — how ironic it was that he had to be bound and gagged for this realization to hit him.

"I want you to watch, offer me your hands only when I ask. Soon, we can participate together, but for now, you've taken too much to take this from me as well." A part of Will wanted punishment, but more of him wanted to prove himself, to both of them.

Hannibal smiled — wide, affectionate, and predatory, all rolled into one. "Of course, Will."

A moment later, he sealed his lips around Will's cock, already hard and leaking. Hannibal's mouth was colored red from the blood that had dripped down from his chest and stomach to

pool in between his legs. He only bobbed his head slightly, spending more time hallowing his cheeks and taking in as much of Will as his throat would allow.

Even like this, with the perceived power differential of Hannibal at his feet, pleasuring him to no obvious satisfaction of his own — though Will knew he took a certain delight to this particular act — Will still felt his own lack of agency. He wanted to grip Hannibal's hair and place a firm hand around his throat to feel how deeply his cock was hitting, but still he had to remain seated, observing, only taking what he was given.

He could not even speak above his gasps and tumbling moans, as if the gag was still in place. Logically, the stinging pain and not insignificant blood loss should have stifled his arousal, if only a touch, but Hannibal knew how to wield his tongue, and the angry adrenaline in Will's veins only fueled him on.

It didn't take long for the coil of tension to build, emphasized by Hannibal's strong hands clutching Will's thighs, leaving small circular bruises that would match the breadth of his fingers. His grip was tight and punishing, but his throat felt like crushed velvet — a rare softness to a man entirely composed of sharp edges.

Will came down his throat after only minutes of Hannibal taking him in his mouth, swallowing and teasing out every drop until Will felt wrung out.

Hannibal released him gently and licked upwards from his cock until he was licking his blood directly from the source wounds. When he finally pulled away, his whole jaw was stained red, like the cackling smile of a hyena.

"Have you tired of this game we're playing yet, darling?" His voice was just a tad rough around the edges. "It's your turn on the other side, your move to make."

"Let me out, Hannibal."

He loosened the restraints without hesitation. Will rubbed his sore wrists as soon as they were free.

When he stood, his vision darkened for a moment, the room spinning around him briefly, though Hannibal didn't try to offer him a hand. Will was glad, he wouldn't have accepted it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

back to these dudes boning weird

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was quiet when they left the basement. Not resentful or frightened or shell-shocked, just quiet. Pensive maybe.

Hannibal wasn't sure what to make of it, but he often found himself lost in the tangled thicket of Will's wandering thoughts. It was a unique sensation that he was slowly realizing he may never get used to. Attempt as he might to understand Will Graham, he'd never be able to predict him fully.

He smiled at the small revelation, comforted down to his core that he could content himself his whole life trying to uncover this mystery.

Curious as he was, he didn't have much time to tease out the ponderings Will was squirreling away. He'd given Hannibal only a week to sort out the rest of his affairs, and while he knew he wouldn't struggle to meet that deadline, certain arrangements needed to be made sooner than later.

He set off right away. Will didn't offer his assistance, nor did Hannibal ask for it. The man may have wanted his full unmasking, that peek behind the curtain of the Ripper, but Hannibal wouldn't expect him to take it all in stride and simply move on. Besides, he had phone calls to make and a basement to disassemble, and Will seemed to want a few moments alone.

Hannibal knew he should probably worry. A quiet, pensive Will Graham was one that was plotting, and, as evidenced by the still-healing wound in his thigh, Will did not take kindly to having his ignorance taken advantage of. There was a larger part of Hannibal that was curious though, he would never stifle Will's violence, and he did not detect any regret in him, so he wasn't worried about Will running off or going back on what they'd planned.

No, whatever retaliation he was planning would be more impulsive, as contrary as that sounded. Will was a man that needed a grand gesture to accompany his shifting morality, and Hannibal was eager to see what he'd come up with, even if it was to Hannibal's detriment.

He didn't expect Will to be waiting for him at the door of his pantry though as he made his way out of the basement once again, finishing putting away a few plastic meat curtains that he could more easily explain away if they were so near his saws.

"What is it, Will?"

"Jack's here. He wants us to come down to Quantico, give statements."

Hannibal couldn't say he was surprised. In all honesty, he'd been expecting this, especially since the BSU's favorite bloodhound was apparently going to be leaving their ranks. There was no reason for suspicion to fall on the two of them, not yet anyway. No concrete evidence

could be traced, nor could firm motive be established, besides a thin thread connecting Lounds — explained away easy enough.

Today, his role would be to play a grieving father, a tired, disillusioned man seeking the sole comfort of his soulmate, aiming to take a permanent vacation from murder.

“Then we best not keep him waiting.” Hannibal smiled at him reservedly, still not quite used to how the expression morphed from conspiratorial to genuine affection as soon as he saw that Will returned it. Whatever he’d been considering, it wasn’t enough to bring about animosity. Also, he noticed that Will had donned one of Hannibal’s sweaters in the few hours that had passed since the restraints had been undone, and that possessive part of him enjoyed seeing Will comfortable in his clothes.

Jack had his hat in his hands, despite the weather. In the moments between Will retrieving him and them arriving at the front door, they’d adopted complimentary masks of resigned sorrow, hidden just enough to not seem obvious, but perceptible to Jack’s keen eye — as intended.

“I’m sorry to have to do this to you both, but I’m sure you understand the state of the investigation. Aside from your statements, we could really use your expertise.” He directed his first query more towards Will, but Will had always been the one he had more influence over. “Both of you.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Will grumbled, following Jack’s heel turn and made his way towards the Bentley, keeping his head bowed and cold hands in his jacket pockets.

They trailed behind Jack’s cruiser the whole way to Quantico, but Hannibal didn’t feel that he was carting himself to his own arrest. There had been no suspicion in Jack’s eyes, not that Hannibal expected to find any, though Hannibal had worked nearly as hard to blind him as he had Will in those initial months. Dinners and late nights by Hannibal’s fireplace, offering a supportive ear did wonders to clear one’s name, almost as much as hard evidence.

People, even those trained for years in forensics, as a whole did not enjoy laying accusations at their friends’ feet. Hannibal had learned very early on that there were only two ways to play this game, either to keep his involvement in his own crimes so far away as to never be noticeable, or to stand directly at the ear of those attempting to find him.

He always chose the latter these days. It was just so much more fun.

“I don’t want this to be where the Ripper disappears,” Will said suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Will he come with us? That could prove suspicious.”

“No, he was born in Baltimore. He’ll die here.” Will paused, that pensive look back again. “If he kills again right before we leave, that will draw just as much suspicion, right?”

“Possibly. With enough mystery involved I’m sure we could slip away before anyone notices. Do you have something in mind?”

“I do. I want everyone to see what we’ve become. Jack deserves the truth and all its consequences, even if there is nothing he can do to change it.” Will gripped the steering wheel just a tad harder, slightly digging his nails into the leather.

“Then we shall steal the wool from his eye, then slip away as bandits in the night.”

Will didn’t take his eyes off the road, but a small slip of tension leaked from his shoulders. He flicked on the radio and began to drum his fingers to Vivaldi’s spring.

They were separated into different interrogation rooms, and even then Hannibal’s confidence did not waver for a second. Will’s did not seem to either, he did not even look back towards Hannibal as another agent carted him off to the adjoining room.

Hannibal folded his hands atop his crossed knee, holding the same amount of controlling surety he would in his office. To an outsider it may seem that the position was entirely natural, a habit developed from his years as a psychiatrist, listening to his patients’ woes, but Hannibal resisted the very idea of a habit, as typical and human as it was. Every movement he made, every stance he adopted, was carefully coordinated. They were far easier to change and discard when need be when they were voluntary.

Jack got right down to brass tacks, almost embarrassed for wasting their time, but not quite. He was just covering all his bases.

“The night we discovered Freddie Lounds’ corpse, you arrived on scene along with Will. Where were you at the time?”

“We were set to head home from the orchestra, where we had been for the proceeding few hours.”

“And Abigail Hobbes? Was there a reason she was not with you? It is to my knowledge that she had been living with you for the last few weeks, ever since she was released from Port Haven.”

He swallowed, averted his eyes for a bare moment, and blinked twice, every movement perfectly calculated. “I had spent the previous night in Wolf Trap with Will. He and I were having a bit of a spat that neither of us wished to involve her in. I came over, we worked through what we needed to, and I convinced Will to come with me.”

For a moment, Hannibal looked down at his lap, towards his hands. He forced a tinge of wetness to coat his eyes, not enough for a tear to fall, but enough to make his eyes shine. “I had suits made, hoping he’d agree to join me. You should have seen him, Jack, so handsome, surrounded by music and opulence as he was. He told me that we should take a picture to send to Abigail.” He bit his lip, a touch of saddened hesitance colored his expression, feigning shame of what he was about to admit. “I told him to wait until we got home, to show her in person.”

He huffed out a quick breath, a pained, soft laugh. “Despite my best efforts, I never could convince her to have a true appreciation for orchestral music, but I thought that since I’d already convinced Will that night, perhaps she’d feel the desire to join us at the next one.” Jack’s gaze held defined sympathy, even in his stoic way. “I had a dress made for her as well,” Hannibal finished softly.

“I know this is difficult for you. I promise this won’t take too much of your time.”

“Thank you, Jack, but I do not need any coddling. I’d like her murderer found, as much as I still desire to distance myself from this investigation.”

“When was the last time you saw Abigail Hobbs?”

“The evening before. Will called me and I let her know she’d likely have the house to herself. She wasn’t afforded a lot of privacy at Port Haven, so she seemed grateful, if a tad too enthused about breaking into my liquor cabinet.” Hannibal adopted a look that cast himself away from this room, as if he was fondly recalling a memory. It was a farce of course, he endeavored to keep himself as present as possible, but expressions were easy to mimic when one realized they were simply physical ticks. “I did not want to restrict her freedom — I purchased her a car when she was released into my care. I do not know where she went that night, she never made any indication to me that she was less than pleased staying in my home.”

His sigh was deep and pained. “I only know where she ended up.”

“That wasn’t all of her.”

“It was enough of her. I am not a fool, Jack. I did not need to go to med school to know how many liters of blood the human body can lose before it can no longer recover. Even if her body does eventually turn up, I have no desire to see her entirely drained of life.”

Jack offered a sad quirk of his lips, his attempt at comforting. He knew loss though, he knew no placating words could stifle grief, but there were far more that could exacerbate it.

He gathered himself back together, strengthening his posture and easing his expression — a pivot to show they would be moving past this particular topic.

“Alana had brought to me a few concerns she apparently already shared with both you and Will. She feels they are falling on deaf ears.”

“Are you asking me now as a friend or an agent?”

“A friend this time. She tells me you are planning on leaving Baltimore?”

“There has been so much bloodshed here recently, Jack. I wish not to abandon you, the Bureau, or my practice, but I can only take so much. You have to understand, she lived with me for such a short amount of time, but at my age I had believed that I’d never gain the opportunity to raise a child. So quickly her presence imbued itself into every room, I had never realized how lifeless the place had seemed until she no longer filled it.”

“You don’t even care to find her murderer? When you leave with Will, you’re taking our best bet at finding him with you.” Ah, Hannibal had been wondering when Jack would play this card, the same guilt trip Alana had tried.

“I have faith that your investigators, my partner aside, will find him, but I’ve grown weary Jack. I left surgery to avoid the trailing fingers of death, yet it followed me home anyway. I’d like to spend a few quiet years with my soulmate, I know you can relate to the sentiment.”

Opposed to Alana, where it was easy to make her feel like an outsider, Hannibal played the ace that he knew would halt Jack’s protests. He knew that the man yearned for a quiet few months to spend with his dying wife, the matching lockets on their fingers shining as he held her close as they walked the canals of Venice.

Jack would have to let them go, if only so he could imagine them enacting the fantasy that he’d never allow himself to grasp.

“I do,” he conceded. “She also raised some concerns about Will’s outburst during the funeral — my apologies for not being in attendance.”

“No apologies needed, though your presence was sorely missed. There were pressing matters to attend to after all, Miss Lass needed you more than anyone else.” Hannibal sighed deeply again, pretending to center himself. “We all respond to grief differently, and Will was in a very similar position to me. He never allowed himself to hope for a child either. I do not fault him for the way he responded to having her torn from us. She was living with me after all, not him, blame falls upon my shoulders as well.”

“No, Hannibal. We all failed her, but this is solely the fault of her killer. Is there anything else that you could tell us at this time that you believe would be relevant to our investigation? She clearly had some connection to the Ripper, she may have come into contact with him at some point before…”

“I'm sorry, Jack. I thought she was happy with me, with us. If she was secretly meeting with another person, it was below my perception.” He allowed false tears to cloud over his eyes and dabbed them lightly with his pocket square. “She laughed, not often but occasionally. She asked me to teach her how to illustrate. I believed she was beginning to recover, I wanted to believe anyway.”

Jack rose from his seat and laid a comforting hand on Hannibal's shoulder. There were absolutely no flaws in Hannibal's grieving mask.

“I won't keep you any longer, Hannibal. I know this is painful for you.”

“Thank you. I will let you know if any more relevant information comes to mind.”

Jack led him out of the room where Will was already waiting for him, a sad, tight expression on his face — resigned and forcibly neutral. Hannibal couldn't be prouder, he knew Will would perform beautifully, needing not a shred of guidance.

He wrapped one arm around Hannibal's shoulder and they both left the facility with their eyes cast downwards and their names cleared, for the moment.

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It only took a few days for the entire basement to be cleared. The dogs were left in the care of a handler that Hannibal paid handsomely to discreetly get them across the ocean. Of course, Will was a nervous wreck the day he had to send them off, but they both agreed this was the cleanest option. They would have a much more difficult time being traced if they didn't have to accommodate seven excitable animals.

Hannibal had always planned for the possibility that he would one day have to leave his home in Baltimore and he would rather not be pursued if he could help it.

In Florence, he'd had enough warning to cover his tracks enough, to leave a suspect and no discernable evidence in his wake. He wasn't sure if he'd have the time to find an individual to take all the residual suspicion here, but he could at least make it more difficult for the FBI to obtain the warrants it needed. The pitfalls of bureaucracy had allowed him the time to slip away more than once, and with how blindsided his prospective captors currently were, he had no doubt that he would get away unscathed.

They, he mentally corrected. For once, he wasn't traveling alone. He'd never had to factor in other people into his little escape artist acts. Everything would become more complicated by miles, but Hannibal was never one to back down from a challenge.

Though, in all brutal honesty, he didn't believe that evading the FBI would be that difficult. His contingencies could be altered, and they weren't actually being pursued at the moment.

No, his real concern — if he could even call it that — centered around the man he would be escaping with.

He already was aware of Will's unpredictability, even to him, with all his intimate knowledge of the strange connections and impulses his beautiful mind gave him. Hannibal's steady heart tended to flutter and fault when he considered them too hard, all the possibilities that Will could inflict upon him. The man was planning something, and he knew it would be dramatic and bloody, but he couldn't for the life of him see what it was.

Will craved destruction, as much as he had craved a child. He was a walking contradiction, trying to give himself ever-flexing sets of rules to follow that he did not truly abide by. More than he had ever been, Will was solid in himself now, confident, assertive, and demanding, but Hannibal wondered if he even realized how much of a beautiful hypocrite he could be at times.

He wanted to give Jack the truth, but he wanted their new life to begin unobstructed. He wanted to take vengeance on Hannibal for his consistent deceit, but he also wanted to love him wholly for the life he gave him. He asked to be Hannibal's victim while desiring to be on the other side of the blade.

Hannibal wouldn't have him any other way — his perfect little mystery to forever attempt to unravel.

Whatever he was planning though, he was getting impatient to bring it into fruition. He was not giving any hints or asking for Hannibal's assistance, he would just watch passively as Hannibal converted his basement into one that didn't look so 'serial killery' — Abigail's words, not his own. He sold some of the tools when he could, under false names for cash only, meeting in non-descript parking lots. Others he dismantled and discarded piece by piece. He actually left the saws though, he just brought down the extra plywood they had from building the kennels.

There was no news one way or another of Abigail, but Hannibal had faith in her. He firmly believed that at this moment, no news was good news. She was smart and resourceful, all he had to worry about on that front was her deciding to stage a teenage coup and breaking a few windows.

Hopefully she liked the Porsche he'd arranged to have sent over to the house. She'd turn nineteen just a few days after Hannibal's and Will's scheduled arrival, and he'd hate to miss giving her a gift if something went awry.

He worked through all his stores of human offal, sighing as he came to terms with the fact that it would likely be a fair bit of time before he could indulge in his meat of choice once again.

For the majority of the week preceding their departure, Will was quiet still, though more affectionate than he'd been since he discovered the antler child. Perhaps he was even moreso now than he'd ever been. Nearly every moment that Hannibal wasn't occupied with the basement — and a few that he was — Will would be touching him in one way or another, especially while he was cooking.

He'd press small kisses to the side of Hannibal's neck and mumble 'smells good' as he prepared their dinner. He'd capture his lips on the doorstep and hold his hand when they were in public. He even allowed Hannibal to pose him once, draped across the recliner so he could draw him. His affection didn't appear nefarious, it all seemed a part of his impulsive charm, as if he'd released some floodgate he'd been firmly holding shut.

Obviously Hannibal wasn't complaining, but he also was unsure what the catalyst was. Both Will's lavished affections and his impatient jitters only seemed to ramp up as the week went on, and, come the end of their stay when most of their belongings that were easy enough to ship over under numerous false names were already sent away, he was basically vibrating out of his skin.

They were set to leave the next day. The plan was to drive southward in one of Hannibal's back up vehicles with plates under falsified papers while a hired driver would take the Bentley up to his property in Montreal — he'd even rented a moving hitch for the driver to take and arranged a buyer for once the car was in place. He couldn't say he'd actually miss it though, perhaps only aesthetically, but he was more than comforted by the beauty of the man he'd be traveling with, even if it would be in a Honda four-door with seven dogs in tow.

Will finally spoke up after nearly an hour of silence. He'd dragged Hannibal down to lay supine on his fur covered couch with his head in Will's lap. His fingers had been trailing through Hannibal's hair so gently and reverently that he'd been on the cusp of sleep for the last twenty minutes, even if he should more logically be concerned with last minute preparations.

"Hannibal?"

He hummed and cracked his eyes halfway, giving his sleepy attention to the man above him, haloed by the soft glow of the lamplight. "Yes, love?"

"Take me hunting tomorrow." The statement wasn't a question, more of a light demand, said in the same tone one might ask their partner to grab them a bottle of painkillers from the medicine cabinet.

"We're leaving tomorrow," Hannibal replied, not as a protest, merely stating a fact.

"Then take me hunting tonight. Everything's ready, you told me we wouldn't be followed."

"You have prey in mind?"

"Yes."

"Will they point towards us?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation in Will's voice, no attempt to disguise his intentions. This was how he was going to be seen, how he was going to show everybody what they'd become.

Hannibal didn't sit up yet, though the relaxed sleepiness had all but vanished from his body. A slow coil of anticipation, or perhaps rare anxiousness to see what Will had in store, was building inside of him. "Then we must be quick, escape into the night before any become aware of the life we have taken."

"Lives," Will corrected. "We will load up everything here, the little that's left, make a few quick stops, and be on our way. Are you coming?"

"Oh course, love. Always."

They packed their last few essentials away into the back of Will's sedan. It was fortunate that Hannibal kept a few knives and scalpels with him, Will's design might not come to fruition if he didn't.

Before they made their way back to Baltimore though, Will drove them to a local gas station small enough to not have sufficient cameras. They paid in cash and returned with three large gas canisters.

"Am I allowed to ask?"

"You called me your wildfire. Figured we only have

so much room for metaphor here so close to the end."

Will wondered if the smell was offensive to Hannibal's sensitive nose, If it did, he didn't give any indication.

"Is this fire cleansing? A rebirth? Or is it meant simply to destroy."

"To insult, to punish, and to make anew. You told me you wanted to see my becoming, I'm going to show you."

"I'm to observe?" He chuckled richly, "It has been quite a few years since I've not directed in some way."

"You've orchestrated enough for the moment. Perhaps I'd like to make *you* my attack dog once in a while. It only seems fair."

He shrugged and gave a relaxed smile , Will could almost see the rows of shark teeth overlayed behind his thin lips.

Chapter End Notes

almost there!! <33 thx yall for being such sweethearts :,]

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Sutcliffe lived alone, though when Will had seen him last, he'd noticed the fading tan line of an old wedding band. It had been a few months since then, Will wondered if it had faded completely by now.

He didn't wonder for long though, he didn't particularly care about how tonight would affect the doctor's ex-wife.

His front door was locked. There were no doorbell cameras in sight. They'd avoided any street cams on the way over, but Will wasn't particularly worried — the plates on the getaway car Hannibal had procured had already been stripped.

A simple lock wasn't as much of a deterrent as people thought. On the empty suburban road with the nearest neighbors being past the couple acres of yard, no one would take notice of Will unscrewing the plate of the doorknob. No surprises would jump at his back either with Hannibal perched behind him like his ever-loyal guard dog.

"Do you have a plan here, Will?" His tone wasn't accusatory, simply curious.

"Does it matter if I don't?"

"You know I value your impulsiveness, but I'd hate for the both of us to wind up dead or incarcerated before you got to have any real fun, and I'd hate to force Abigail to care for seven dogs without any assistance."

"Then we better not get caught."

Hannibal nodded in a small acquiesce as the last of the screws fell from their moorings. Will caught the heavy piece of metal before it could clatter against the wooden porch steps, and pushed his way inside the quiet, solitary cleanliness of Dr. Donald Sutcliffe's home.

Will could hear the doctor snoring on the second floor with no whir of a CPAP machine to deaden the sound. He lightened his own tread, but it was unlikely they'd be heard over the rumbling sounds. At least he didn't have to worry about any noises besides the ones he was making — Hannibal's silent tread was nearly imperceptible though he was just mere feet behind him.

He couldn't stop now. If he stopped for even a moment then he'd begin to think, and if he started to think he'd want to run and hide himself away, just like he always had.

Donald Sutcliffe might be an abrasive, arrogant man who cared more about his own image and curiosity than the well-being of his patients. If Hannibal had desired it, Sutcliffe would've

signed away all of Will’s autonomy if it gained him the respect of his colleague. Even so, that didn't mean he was deserving of death as recompense.

But this was no longer about who was deserving or not. That pretense had withered to nothing when he decided that he no longer cared for the lives taken by his lover and daughter, then sank to less than nothing in Hannibal's basement.

For all they'd been through and done to each other, they had never hunted together. Even not knowing what Hannibal was all those months ago, he'd still craved the chase, and this promise hadn't been upheld.

All that was left now was to cut out this lingering piece of humanity that still tried to tell his altered mind what it should want.

He paused at the unlocked bedroom door. Hannibal's firm hand fell upon his shoulder, either an encouragement or an assurance, perhaps both. Will shrugged him off with a pointed movement and grabbed the serrated hunting knife from his own belt.

They didn't speak, and it wasn't in fear of being heard. Hannibal took a step back easily, content to watch and allow Will to use him when the need arose.

The door creaked as he passed through the threshold. For a moment, Will thought Sutcliffe had woken to their presence, but the resting man merely turned over in his sleep, snoring again loudly the moment he was settled.

He raised his knife to the man's throat, then over his heart. If he pierced his either point, the doctor would die within seconds. His hand moved, almost without Will’s intention, down to the sleeping man’s gut.

In one instant, uniquely clear of any cloying voices, he plunged the knife down. The first sensation he was aware of was how easily the knife slipped inside. *Like wet clay* , Abigail had said.

Sutcliffe let out an instinctual scream, but the sound was only allowed to escape him for a moment before Will was stuffing his mouth with his own bedsheets. He yanked the knife out, not saying a single word as he watched the pain fully register across Sutcliffe’s features. The wide set of his eyes, the muffled screams wetting the cloth in his mouth, the hot tears already streaking down his cheeks — Will had never been able to observe in such detail.

Will wheezed as the doctor managed to knee him in the gut, he hadn’t been pinned down firmly enough.

He sat back, partly to regain his breath, partly in curiosity to see what the man would do in his desperation. Instead of screaming the moment his mouth was uncovered, he rolled off the bed, groaning as he clutched the wound Will had left.

Sutcliffe staggered to his feet while Will watched him closely, mutely, like a predator waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. He had no reason to hesitate now, but apparently that urge of Hannibal’s to toy with his prey had rubbed off on him.

The man began to hobble towards the door, always keeping Will in his line of sight. Apparently, his instincts weren't to plead for his life, just to get away. Will saw the precise moment he realized they weren't alone.

"D-Dr. Lecter?" he gasped out, still bent halfway over, clutching his side hard.

"Good evening, Donald. Pretend I am not here, I've been relegated to observing for the night, I believe." He stood still and resolute in front of the door, like a warding gargoyle.

Will didn't stop the wicked grin that bloomed on his face as he saw the hope drain from the doctor's, as if it was leaking out of him like blood from his gut.

"No, no please *Hannibal—"* Will didn't let him get out whatever pathetic plea he was building to. He drove his knife through the back of his ribcage, just below his shoulder blade. His free arm anchored around Sutcliffe's neck, choking off his air supply so he couldn't let out another scream.

He used the weight of Sutcliffe's own body to drive the knife deeper, twisting it and jerking it around to feel the different textures of his bones and organs. Blood spilled warm across his hand as he exposed the man's innards that were never meant to taste open air. A spot of drool leaked onto his arm from the dying man's desperately gasping mouth.

After a moment, he yanked the knife out and sheathed it back in the pouch at his waist and forced his hand into the forced opening between his ribs. There was too much muscle to reach his heart, but Will could feel the stuttered beats as it tried in vain to keep the body alive.

He felt the moment the unsteady beats came to a halt. His own pulse felt stronger in turn as Sutcliffe's weakly trailed off.

Will felt flush, flooded with blood and strength, though his strong pulse was entirely steady. His hands didn't shake, his knees didn't feel weak. His mind was clear, not a single foreign thought to invade this precious moment.

" *Beautiful.* "

In his serene haze, Will had almost forgotten the other occupant of this room. He allowed the corpse of what used to be Dr. Donald Sutcliffe to fall to the floor without a shred of dignity, and walked over to Hannibal on steady, firm legs.

"What are you thinking of, *mylimasis?* " Hannibal asked breathlessly. Even in the low light of the bedroom, Will could see that he was flushed.

Will swallowed and breathed in deeply, taking in the copper scent of the room. "Nothing at all. The pure clarity of sensation."

The other man looked him up and down reverently, taking in every tiny detail. "And how do you feel?"

“Powerful.” He glanced down at the cooling corpse. “He didn't deserve to die,” he said neutrally.

“You wanted to kill him, therefore he didn't deserve to live. He'd committed enough offense in your eyes to warrant this.”

“This was about killing for the sake of killing, wasn't it?” Will cocked his head, wanting to see where Hannibal would try to warp this.

“If you simply wanted to kill, with no motive in mind, any random person would have sufficed, but I know you better than that, Will. You would not draw your knife on a person the world would not be better off without. Donald took your autonomy and the respect you deserve, as he did with many of his patients, and you took his life as penance.” Will could hear the pride loud and true in Hannibal's voice, caressing him. A part of him wanted the caress to turn physical, though he couldn't here, not with this kill that was solely his own.

“I'm not starting a career in vigilantism. I derived pleasure from doing this, feeling my knife sliding into his flesh. There is no heroism in that.”

“And you are no hero, Will. Despite his lacking bedside care, he was a talented doctor. He could have saved lives. This is a net loss overall, but that does not mean it's without reason or elegance. I found your brutality quite astonishing, and for offending you, this was entirely just.” For the first time since he entered, he stepped a foot closer. “What are you to do now? You told me this would not be our last stop of the evening.”

“It's not. Bring me one of the gas canisters, would ya? I'm going to go hunt down a lighter.”

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Will didn’t allow him to help past fetching the supplies he required, not that he minded though. Hannibal was perfectly content being his enraptured witness.

More than content, really. Will, his radiant, terrible, beautiful, bloody Will. He couldn’t say he expected this, nothing Will had done since he arrived at the scenes their charge made had been within Hannibal’s predictions, and at this point, he was hesitant to even ask. Lest he spoil the surprise.

He followed Will around the house of his recently deceased colleague at a short distance, reminded a bit of the trailing trainees from his days in the ER. Just as their eager eyes followed and studied the movements of the resident surgeon’s hands, he watched Will’s as they left spiraling trails of gasoline around the house.

His soulmate didn’t speak and Hannibal left him to his moment of quiet revelation. As much as he desired unfettered insight into Will’s mind, his becoming was sacred. Hannibal would only influence as far as to bring it into the light , what came after was for his beloved to discover.

“Go wait outside,” Will said softly, the only sound in minutes above their pattering footsteps and the trickle of pouring liquid.

“Of course, Will.” He could likely sense Hannibal’s reluctance, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t be left lingering long.

He was only allowed his solitude for a minute or so, not that he sought to extend it, before Will joined him and tossed the empty canister in the trunk. Without a word or nod of acknowledgement, he turned back to the house and lowered the flame from the lighter to the gasoline trail he brought all the way to the front door.

For a few moments, all he could see of the impending inferno was a lit doorway, only as bright as the yellow glow of the porch lights.

The shadows of Will’s silhouette danced around him as the flames writhed, distorting his lithe figure across the manicured lawn. His eyes were brilliant as he turned away, as if some of that building fire had crawled into him. Perhaps it had already been there.

My wildfire, indeed.

For the first time since they arrived, that reserved exterior of his shattered. Will took a few quick steps towards him and clutched him close around his shoulders, burying his face in Hannibal’s neck and fisting the material of his shirt in tight fingers.

“Oh, Will,” he sighed, holding him back just as tightly only a moment later. “This is all I ever wanted for you.”

“I needed this one for myself,” he whispered into the skin of Hannibal’s neck, barely intelligible over the crackle of burning wood.

“I understand, love. I’d never take this away from you. I’m solely grateful that you have allowed me to bear witness to your design.”

They lingered for a long moment before they parted. Behind them, the light from the fire burned brighter. By the time the rising heat and tumbling support beams shattered a window, they were long gone, disappearing into the night.

The security measures at their second stop of the night were slightly more thorough, though there weren’t any cameras in sight. This automated lock wouldn't be dispatched with a simple screwdriver.

Will had bloomed to life on the car ride over, born again in the flames he brought forth. He’d been more reserved these past few weeks than Hannibal had seen him since he left the hospital, but he was downright giddy as they drove from Dr. Sutcliffe’s home.

He’d tossed a jacket over his bloodstained shirt and wiped his hands on the insides of his pockets. If this was to become a pattern then Hannibal would insist on more hygienic practices in the future, but for now, he didn’t have the heart to tell Will to wipe off the maroon flecks on the underside of his jaw.

Will nudged him forward, urging him to take the lead this time. “Get him to invite us in. Tell him it's an emergency and you need his expertise.” He smiled up at him, wide and sharply. “He wants your respect terribly, he won’t even think to question why you didn’t call.”

“Are you to be my emergency then?”

“I've got plenty of experience being out of my mind. I'm sure I can fake it.”

Will certainly looked appropriately disheveled at the moment. His hair was in messy disarray, his clothes were rumpled and untucked, and his cheeks were pleasantly flushed. Excitement could appear so close to fever, as long as the bright, *alive,* expression he wore deadened.

Hannibal slung an arm around Will’s waist and drew one of his arms to be draped around Hannibal’s shoulders, keeping him upright as the other man pretended to slump into catatonia. His eyes glazed over in an instant and his head fell forward between his shoulders, feigning a careful blankness.

“Impressive, Will. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you truly slipped away.” Hannibal supported him more thoroughly as he allowed his legs to stop keeping him upright. “Have you fabricated an affliction yet?”

“Let’s leave the diagnosis to the good doctor. I’m sure he’ll be over the moon to get a peak.”

Hannibal stroked his hand possessively along Will’s hip. “I’m sure he will.” With that, he began pounding heavily on the door. His knocks were frantic, he only pressed the doorbell after a few seconds, like he’d forgotten it was there.

After only a few seconds, a light flickered on in the upstairs window and Hannibal could see a shape moving behind closed blinds. He knocked again, more frantically, and donned his own mask of desperate concern. It was still muted, of course — it wouldn’t do to act out of character — but he had to seem appropriately worried.

A moment later, the door opened. Frederick Chilton was clothed in silken pajamas, though Hannibal internally cringed at the branding, solely expensive with no consideration for texture or softness.

“Hannibal-?”

“I’m so sorry to drop in on you like this, Frederick, but I’m afraid I have nowhere else to turn.”

His eyes widened, Hannibal saw a hint of delight before he quickly covered it with the same stilted professionalism he pretended to give off in his facility.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Will.” Hannibal clutched him closer to his side so he could release his arm and tap the side of his slack face lightly. “He’s not responding. I’ve checked his vitals, tried to coax him out, nothing’s worked. He was experiencing a bout of paranoia before he just…shut down. Please, I wouldn’t ask if I wasn't desperate.”

He only hesitated for a moment before he ushered the both of them inside, flicking on the lights in his post-modernist home as he guided them to his pristine living room. They deposited Will's limp body on his sofa while Chilton kneeled in front of him, prodding a bit at his cheeks slightly agape jaw. Will's eyes weren't closed, but they were far off and glassy, they didn't focus on anything in front of him, especially not Chilton's waving hand.

"You didn't take him to the hospital?" There was a barely restrained glee in Chilton's voice, though whether that was due to the possibility of forging Hannibal's respect or being presented the opportunity to study Will Graham's mind in such a vulnerable state, Hannibal couldn't say for sure. Likely, it was a combination of both.

"I determined that whatever is afflicting him is psychological in nature rather than physiological." Will twitched near imperceptibly on the sofa, perhaps remembering those words in a similar context not too long ago. "Hence why I sought out your expertise."

Chilton preened under the praise and went right back to examining his 'patient'.

"Well it's like you said, his vitals seem normal, his breathing isn't irregular and his heart isn't racing. Perhaps he needs a shock of some sort, to bring him back to consciousness? I have a few accelerants in my medicine cabinet."

Hannibal twitched his lip in displeasure. He didn't even have to fake it this time, the thought of Frederick Chilton even coming close to Will with a needle was nauseating. No one else was allowed to touch him, care for him, or administer anything into him, especially not while he was unawares. Not that Will was actually catatonic at the moment, but still the thought sat heavy in his gut. "I suppose, if there's no other option."

He left the room a moment later, leaving Hannibal alone kneeling in front of Will. A wicked grin played on Will's lips the second Chilton's back was turned and his thousand yard stare turned into sharp, excited focus.

"Are you ready, my darling?" Hannibal whispered, ghosting his breath across the shell of his ear.

He nodded, just once. "Do you have your scalpel?"

"Always."

"Don't let him touch me, alright? You got to witness me, I'd like to witness you." His voice was soft, but nearly trembling with anticipation.

"I've only seen your design so sparingly, would you deny me to see another?"

"Don't worry, I'll come running at the first sign of blood."

"The lion stealing the hyena's kill? I never took you for a scavenger."

"I thought we were of the same pride? Don't fight me now, darlin'. You told me you'd kill as I asked."

He heard Chilton's footsteps as he plodded back towards them. Hannibal only stole a quick moment to press his lips swiftly against Will's and sigh into the scant space between them. "I did. Do not worry, he shall not harm you."

He pretended to be checking Will's pulse again, first on his neck, then on his wrist as Chilton stepped into the room.

"Any changes?"

"No, still nothing. He's not blinking either, I'm worried that his eyes could get too dry."

"I have some eye drops as well, though I'm confident this shall work." He brandished a syringe filled with a clear liquid. "Would you mind giving me some space, doctor? I need to be able to access his vein."

He didn't offer the syringe in Hannibal's direction, even though his hands were subtly shaking. How long had it been since Chilton administered medications to his own patients without the use of aids? The man was known as a dismal surgeon, perhaps that had more to do with his aversion to blood than a truly unsteady hand.

Hannibal stepped away, making a show of both his reluctance and his 'gratitude' for the help of his colleague. He stood behind him, slipping his scalpel from his sleeve as Chilton reached for Will's arm, turning the appendage over and tapping nervously against the vein. His hesitation only now started to show while he hovered the needle over the crook of Will's elbow.

A moment before Hannibal was set to strike, Will's far-off expression dropped for amused clarity. Chilton didn't seem to notice, the needle lowered, just above the delicate skin, and in that same instant Hannibal's scalpel punctured — though didn't sever — his trachea.

Will was up from the couch in an instant, his hunting knife glinting in his hand.

Chilton spun around, his wide eyes searching for answers in Hannibal's steely expression. It was a mistake to turn his back on the second predator in the room.

Hannibal sidestepped Chilton as he stumbled forward and away from the blade Will thrusted into the muscle of his lower back. He tried to scream, but his pierced windpipe only allowed him to wheeze.

Where Sutcliffe had stumbled towards him in misplaced, hopeful desperation, Chilton seemed to catch on quicker that there was no solace to be found in either of the men that came for him. He attempted to crawl along the ground towards the front door, but his wounds made him sluggish. Blood loss from the gash in his side and a lack of adequate oxygen were draining him quickly.

Will watched him crawl for a few moments. It seemed that there was a pathology developing in his beloved, a desire to see their prey struggle. Hannibal hadn't anticipated that Will would share his more sadistic tendencies, but the man was always so full of surprises.

“Fascinating, isn’t it? How they cling so desperately to a life that’s already lost to them,” Hannibal said over the harsh sounds of Chilton’s wheezing.

“They’re so honest at the point of death.” Will kicked the dying man in his kidney, opposite the one punctured with his knife. “From the moment I met him, I knew he wasn’t anything more than a worm, squirming on the ground for scraps of prestige.”

“Did you wish to see him as he is now when you first made his acquaintance?”

“I think so, or a part of me did at least.”

Hannibal’s attention had entirely left their victim. “Extreme acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy. You are understanding him, and through that you will know what hurts him the most.”

“You do a pretty good job of that yourself, even though I know there’s not an empathetic bone in your body. Perhaps I’ve been mistaken though, you’ve wounded me before, so *personally* that it makes me think that you are capable of empathizing, if only so you can cause pain.”

“You are already aware of my motivations, love. If I have gained any empathy in the process it was entirely your doing.” Will merely shrugged, as if he expected that answer.

Chilton staggered to his feet while pressing down tightly to the puncture in his neck. He’d likely survive his current injuries if he made it to a hospital. He glared at Hannibal with wide-eyed betrayal and tried to speak again, but that would not be possible until the hole in his trachea was closed.

Instead of pursuing him right away as he staggered back, Will came up behind Hannibal, and kissed him gently just below his ear. “You’ve never fed me *live* meat before,” he said with a whisper, sending a full body shiver down Hannibal’s spine.

“None but my own.”

“I’d say he seems fairly clean, and I want to see you without any reservations before we make our escape.”

How could Hannibal possibly deny him when he asked so sweetly? His Will desired a show and a fresh meal, and it was one of Hannibal’s greatest pleasures to be a provider.

He stalked their pig in long, quick steps, Will following only a pace behind. He allowed him to drag the scalpel from his hands, not that he’d need it anyway. He’d never feed Will with a tool when his teeth were perfectly serviceable.

Chilton was only a couple feet from his front door, and though Hannibal knew him to be a self-aggrandizing coward, he wasn't foolish enough to feel any hope yet.

Hannibal went for his neck immediately. His teeth could be as sharp as any blade if he chose to use them. He thrashed about in Hannibal’s hold, his hand that wasn’t keeping his blood

within him flailing about and smacking the wall near the front entrance. Hannibal's incisors tore into the flesh of his neck and pulled, feeling the skin pull away like taffy.

A sharp pain erupted in his thigh a moment later. Something hard and blunt had been jammed right into the wound that Will left him. Already he could feel warm liquid soaking into the fabric of his trousers. He grunted, his mouth still dripping with blood, but before he could tear out the throat of this miserable cretin, he heard a seething growl from behind him.

Will rounded his side and jammed the knife into the divot just under Chilton's ribs. His eyes were blazing, so full of fury that could not be contained that Hannibal feared he may erupt into an inferno just from one glance.

That beautiful rage was not for him though. He watched enraptured as Will's knife dragged up and up until it snagged on the hard press of bone, and even then, Will did not stop dragging him upwards.

Chilton's heels were forced off the ground. The only noises he was capable of making were choked gurgles as blood spilled from his lips.

The sound of glass staggering interrupted the display for only a moment as Hannibal saw what was jammed into his thigh — a picture frame containing a copy of Chilton's med school diploma.

Hannibal smiled as blood fell onto the paper obscuring the award of title.

There was still one more act he had to commit before Chilton's heart gave out entirely. Hannibal locked his jaw around the man's throat, feeling his thrumming arteries and punctured trachea under his teeth. He tore through them all in one bite, like a saber cat, all under the awed attention of his darling Will.

With the veins, muscle, blood, and viscera still hanging from his mouth, he surged forward, tossing Chilton aside as he crashed into his beloved.

Will parted for him immediately, swallowing the mouthful as Hannibal tasted it going down his throat. There was no movement from Chilton, but he'd been dead before he hit the floor.

They stayed with and against each other, breathless and hungry as they licked the blood and fresh meat from the others' mouths. Will moaned into him while his wet hands coated his jaw in a thick red smear.

"This," he sighed as Will worked his way down his jaw. "This is all I ever wanted for you."

He grabbed a fist full of Hannibal's hair and jerked his head to the side before biting down harshly on his ear lobe. "For both of us," he whispered back, breathing hotly against the shell.

It was minutes before they parted, and when they did it was with heavy reluctance on both ends. They didn't have time for further intimacy tonight, not if they wanted to get away unscathed.

He couldn't help but to take a few moments to observe Will's breathtaking portraits though. His hair was wild, his mouth was flecked with red and pink streaks, his fists were still balled in Hannibal's dress shirt and his eyes had taken on the quality of a lit hearth — warm, familiar, and loving. A stray trail of blood had leaked from his kiss-swollen lips, all the way down the side of his neck, perfectly interweaving with a dark tine.

He laughed gently, his expression becoming impossibly softer. “Are you going to stare all night?”

“I can imagine nothing I'd rather do.”

The moment felt impossible. This was nothing a man like him could hope to dream for, but this life he was building with Will was better than any dream he could conceive of. He filed every little detail away in his memory palace, it seemed that the many wings he made just for Will might soon overtake the long and dark corridors where he kept the rest of his life.

“Well I'd rather get moving, we've been here long enough.” Will kissed him once more before he was retreating to grab the next canister of gasoline.

Hannibal went to grab the third, but Will halted him at the door. “We've got one more stop after this.”

“I'd never seek to put a muzzle on your design, but we might be erring on the side of danger if we visit another home.”

“Don't worry. This last one will be quick, and then we'll be gone. Ghosts in the night.”

As was becoming habit, Hannibal acquiesced, unable to resist the enticing, confident twist of Will’s mouth when he knew *exactly* what he wanted and *exactly* how he was going to get it.

Chapter End Notes

will being violent and confident makes me salivate

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The late Frederick Chilton's home burned just as brightly as Sutcliffe's, but they did not linger to see it. Wailing sirens blared only a few minutes after they left, but they stayed on backroads and side streets as they weaved their way back through the heart of Baltimore.

The route became increasingly familiar with each turn, but it was the gleam in Will's eyes that cemented their destination.

He had believed he'd seen the last of his home when he left for Will's the night before. Everything was already packed, disassembled, discarded, sold, or shipped away. At this point, the house was merely a skeleton of what it had been, but Hannibal couldn't stifle his lingering fondness.

"There's no need to burn my home, Will. There's nothing left within to incriminate me."

Will shook his head. "We're not here to bury evidence."

"Then why have we come?"

"You burned me. Again and again and again until I finally, *painfully* saw you in your entirety. Even when I saw you and did not recoil, you still were not done with your reckoning. Each time you gutted me, you did so knowing you were safe. You could hide until I came around to your way of thinking."

They parked in the shadow of a townhouse, off the main road.

"There are no more places for you to strategically retreat, Hannibal. If I have to, I'll follow you and burn every single one until you face the family you created, just as I have."

Hannibal carried the canister into his home. There was something calming to know that the place he lived, all the experiences he had here, would not be tainted by a new resident. Not within these walls.

"I won't deny that I have become attached to this home. I will be saddened to see it crumble. Though, there is a certain catharsis to ending this life of ours in flames."

"It shall be cleansing. A rebirth for our next life to begin."

Hannibal took a deep breath in, smelling the night time air, though it was taunting by the stench of gasoline. After a long moment of just watching the still house, Hannibal offered his free arm to Will.

"I suppose it's time for our final tour then."

Will tucked his hand into Hannibal's arm and tugged him into the silent building.

———

They trailed around the rooms, mostly as a silent, united front, working their war from the top down. Some of them were mostly empty. Abigail's converted studio seemed like it had been stripped entirely. Surprising though, the only missing bits from Hannibal's room were the polished set of samurai armor, and only about half his clothes.

Will didn't question the decision though. It only showed how willing Hannibal was to leave the facets of their old life behind him.

They made their way to Hannibal's study. Most of his books were gone, and Will would feel a bit bad about the few that were left over.

Hannibal walked around the large room, spiraling inward as the gasoline followed his path. Will paused at his desk, leafing through a few of Hannibal's drawings.

Most were anatomical and architectural studies, with few artistic liberties taken, but Will spied a few familiar features sketched in between. At one point, he peeled back a bear-perfect recreation of Quantico and saw his own eyes staring back at him — oddly enchanting and bright despite the heavy bags underneath.

Towards the bottom of the stack was a piece that was more than familiar though. Sill remembered when they constructed these kennels together using this blueprint.

He raised his head towards the large bay windows, spying the small wooden houses along the exterior wall. They were tragically unused. Will never actually had the chance to introduce the chaos of his dogs to Hannibal's orderly home.

Hannibal's tread was still light as ever, but Will didn't flinch when he came close and laid a hand on his shoulder, peering around to see what Will was looking at.

“Are you disappointed our hard work went to waste?” he asked, setting down the gasoline canister at their feet.

“I enjoyed that day, even if we were just killing time being Abigail’s alibi.”

“Do you truly believe thatI solely wanted your company for that reason, Will? An alibi was a passing consideration once you arrived.”

He flushed slightly, both from Hannibal's words and the memories of how that evening ended.

“Not anymore at least,” he conceded, leaning back into the other man. He took the blueprints and rolled them up and folded them until they fit into his jean pocket, much to Hannibal's chagrin. “Let's build them again at our new home, since we can't take these ones.”

“We could make improvements. There would be a whole pack of test animals to make them perfect.”

“They're dog kennels, even if they start ‘perfect’, they're not going to stay that way.”

“I do not see why we cannot endeavor to make them all that they can be. Your dogs deserve the best, no?”

“You know I can't argue with that. We’ll build them together, just like we did before.”

“If you'll allow me, I'd love to paint them as well. Perhaps our charge might also join in.” The regretful look on Hannibal’s face had all but faded, leaving behind an excited gleam.

He led Will out of the study and continued to trail the gasoline around the hole until they both reached the front door.

His Bentley was already gone — driven up to Canada and sold to a buyer under a false name — and now he watched calmly as the last vestiges of his independent life in Baltimore went up in flames. They didn't linger, they had to be as far away as they could before the sirens could begin to blade. The fire marshalls would be too late by the time they arrived though. The gasoline spread to every corner of the house would make the inferno too hot and dangerous for them to approach before it had consumed most everything it could.

Hannibal would miss that home, though he knew better than to become particularly attached. With the way he loved. all his residences were temporary. There was only so long that he could dodge the authorities as his activities continued.

There was a certain attachment he had to Baltimore though, but he rationalized that the only attachment that was birthed here was coming with him.

“Will you miss your home?” Hannibal asked, glancing at the rising smoke in the rear view mirror.

“No. I've come to realize I never really enjoyed living there to begin with. It was a good spot for the dogs, very open and away from any trafficked roads, but it was so far from *everything*.

“Wasn't that the initial draw?”

“Yeah, but I was lonely. More than I cared to admit.”

Your solitude was of necessity. You wouldn't have been able to live with anyone else flooding your mind.”

“Anyone but you,” he agreed. “You claim your solitude was by choice too. I thought it was, before I was able to see you, but I know your solitude was by necessity as well, and it's not just because of the meat you prefer.”

“What necessity, then?”

“Fear, same as mine.”

Hannibal couldn't disguise the displeased tick of his upper lip, not quick enough for Will not to catch it.

“It's true, though I know you hate admitting it,” Will continued. “You're afraid of letting someone in and having them reject you, but you're also afraid of letting someone in and having them *pity* you, which would be worse.

“That scared little boy you were is not the man and monster you are now, but his presence had to be acknowledged. He couldn't be left out in the snow.”

“I was afraid,” Hannibal replied softly, letting his gaze fall from the rising smoke land where it was always meant to — on Will. Always upon Will. “I'm not anymore. Those cold nights seem very far away at the moment.” The air outside was biting, but he barely felt the chill, he hadn't all night.

Will watched him from the corner of his eye, not a speck of ice to be found in those slate blues. His focus was back on the road only a moment later, but his hand fell atop Hannibal's thigh, as a replacement. Immediately, his own covered Will’s, tracing mindless patterns across his knuckles.

He didn't even realize he was replicating the branching paths of their soulmark.

“Will France be warmer than here? he asked softly after a few minutes of reflective silence. “Sometimes I find myself missing the climate of Louisiana, even though I'm already prone to sweating through the night.”

“You're an entirely pleasant bed companion. I haven't noticed any excessive perspiration. I believe that it is a bit warmer, yes, though not as humid as you were used to.”

“I think it'll be good for us — all of us. Less layers to wear, less masks.”

“Fewer barriers between the things we love.”

Will squeezed his thigh and pulled off to the side of the road now that they were outside the prying eyes of Baltimore.

“Is there a problem, Will?”

“Not a single one.”

He leaned over the center console and kissed Hannibal deeply. His rough hands tugged at Hannibal's shoulder and the back of his head until he was pressing Will into the driver's seat, devouring his mouth, pouring in as much of himself as he could, all for Will to swallow down.

They didn't part for a few long minutes, simply basking in the onset of the life they were about to begin together.

Chapter End Notes

thats it yall!! plus a short epilogue :3

6 months later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal brought the mail and a mug of hot coffee to the back porch. Without looking up from the book he was reading, Will extended his hand, gratefully receiving the warm beverage.

As usual, it was perfect, dark with minimal sugar, homemade creamer, and a splash of honey. It was smooth and rich sliding down his throat, richer a moment later when Hannibal was crouching down to taste it directly from Will's lips.

Winston whined as Will's hand moved to thread through his lover's hair rather than continue to lave attention onto his dog; he had to gently push the other man away after a few moments. Will didn't want to upset Winston too much in the early hours of the day, especially since he wouldn't be happy when Will inevitably directed him out of the master suite for the night.

“Anything interesting?” he nodded at the stack of envelopes in Hannibal’s hand. He was passed off a French fishing magazine that he could only read about half of.

“It seems Abigail has been making friends. She also included a newspaper clipping that she’s apparently mentioned in.” Will scanned the contents of the letter she sent, laughing as half the page was taken up with her complaining that Hannibal won’t just ‘text her like a normal person.’ The news clipping was interesting though, it wasn’t from her school paper, but rather the city publisher. Will couldn’t see the name she’d adopted printed anywhere, but front and center on the first page was the image of a curled up young man, a pair of antlers sprouting from his neck.

Apparently a rather artful murder had been committed in her area. How dreadful.

He’d call her tonight and make sure she was ‘staying safe.’

“Well, I’m glad she’s staying busy.”

They sat together in comfortable silence for a few minutes, only interrupted by the whining of an attention-seeking dog and Hannibal’s fountain pen scratching against thick cardstock. When he was done, he blew lightly over the letter, drying the ink, and stored it away for their mailman to deliver tomorrow.

Weekends were peaceful typically, Will still wasn’t quite used to the fact that he wouldn’t be called upon to investigate a scene at a moment’s notice. He worked only when he wanted, a luxury he had not known he ached for. Will wasn’t sure if his constantly-working father would consider him lazy or successful.

It didn’t matter in any case. He was happier now than he’d ever been, and that was all that mattered.

Energized from the coffee and warmed by the sun, Will drew Hannibal to sit with him on their back porch veranda. A row of freshly painted dog houses sat along the far wall of the house — it turns out that Hannibal had a steadier hand than Abigail for painting the tiny, though anatomically correct, flowers along the base, but the stylized animals that she added brought a whole different charm to the wooden structures.

Will even spied the edge of a large sprawl of antlers adorning one side, his only contribution. Hannibal had to steady his hand as he guided the brush.

“Any plans for today, love?” Hannibal asked as Will laid back on the chaise lounge, his knees propped up and spread enough for Hannibal to fit between them.

“Just this.” He pulled the other man up, cupping his jaw so they were eye to eye and chest to chest. Will planted a quick, soft kiss right on his lips. “Just you.”

Hannibal’s responding smile was radiant, warming him more thoroughly than the heat of the summer morning.

“Just you,” Hannibal echoed, and leaned in as well.

Chapter End Notes

thx to everyone who stuck around for this fic! im not going to lie, im glad that its finished, i know the ending was kind of rushed. but! i love yall and all ur sweet comments!! kisses for everyone <33

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